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# Black and White Multiracial Adult Womens' Experience of Their Physical Appearance: A Qualitative Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis

Vanessa Geissler  
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Black and White Multiracial Adult Women's Experience of Their Physical Appearance:

A Qualitative Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of

Antioch University Seattle

Seattle, WA

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

By

Vanessa Geissler

October 2016

Black and White Multiracial Adult Women's Experience of Their Physical Appearance:

A Qualitative Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis

This dissertation, by Vanessa Geissler, has  
been approved by the committee members signed below  
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of the  
Antioch University Seattle at Seattle, WA in partial fulfillment  
of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

BLACK AND WHITE MULTIRACIAL ADULT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF  
THEIR PHYSICAL APPEARANCE:  
A QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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According to the 2010 United States Census 1.8 million people self-identified as multiracial Black, and of that 1.8 million, 45% self-identified as Black and White. Multiracial individuals are a growing population in the United States, and by year 2050 an estimated 21% of the entire population will be multiracial. Irrespective of these statistics, research among this population is limited. Further research is warranted because existing literature has identified an increased emphasis on multiracial individual's physical appearance. Questions such as, "What are you?" or labels such as *exotic*, *beautiful*, *fascinating*, or *other*, are a few examples of how this population is positively and negatively objectified. However, the psychological impact these interactions may exert on the development of body esteem is not very well researched. An understanding of this phenomenon is useful to mental health professionals because it will increase their cultural competence. Increasing cultural competence is exceptionally important because it assists the professional in acknowledging and validating experiences unique to multiracial individuals, becoming aware of the descriptive labels used, and assumptions made about this population as a whole. Being aware of this information will

provide them the foundation to engage in meaningful discussions about the socially constructed challenges that multiracial individuals face, and help them avoid perpetuating preconceptions and misconceptions about this population. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assist in filling the knowledge gap of the unknown experience of body image among multiracial Black and White young adult women. This phenomenological study was conducted to provide an in-depth description of how six self-identified multiracial Black and White women between 18 and 30 years old living in the Pacific Northwest experienced their physical appearance. The researcher utilized a descriptive phenomenological method of data analysis. The findings of this study yielded three overarching themes: sociopolitical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal influences, with 12 constituents identified: am I exotic?, ambiguous hair texture, dealing with my hair, does a biracial beauty standard exist?, feeling marginal, love/hate relationship with physical features, physical features I want to change, race and physical appearance in America, racially categorized by others, unearned power and privilege, other vs. self-identification, and unique insights of Black/White biracial participants on societal beauty. Based on these findings, this researcher identified experiences of marginalization, isolation, disconnection from peers and family, and racial self-identity issues. The electronic version of this dissertation is at AURA: Antioch University Repository and Archive, <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and OhioLINK ETD Center, <http://etd.ohiolink.edu>

## Dedication

I dedicate this work to the six women who participated in this study. Because of you, this research was possible. Your experiences will remain as a reminder to me to continue pursuing research in this area.

*“Be the change that you wish to see in the world.”*

Mahatma Gandhi

## Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my chairperson, Dr. Jude Bergkamp, and committee members Dr. Carla Bradshaw and Dr. William Heusler, who not only supported and guided me, but understood the importance of this research and believed in me to conduct it.

To my father and my husband, thank you for your unwavering support throughout my graduate career. You encouraged me when I needed it the most, had faith in me and my abilities when I struggled, and celebrated me in my accomplishments.

To my sweet Adelyn, Mommy loves you dearly. Your future is bright, and I know that you will accomplish greater things than I.

Lastly, thank you to my extended family and friends who supported me and stuck with me until the very end. My apologies for all of the missed events and memories made. So here's to a lifetime of making new ones!



<u>Table of Contents</u>	<u>Page</u>
Dedication .....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	v
List of Tables .....	viii
I. Introduction .....	1
II. Literature Review .....	5
III. Methodology .....	32
IV. Method.....	37
V. Procedures.....	45
VI. Results.....	52
VII. Limitations, Implications, and Conclusions .....	70
References.....	80
Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Flyer.....	87
Appendix B: Participant Interview Prompts.....	89
Appendix C: Participant Information and Consent Form .....	91

<u>List of Tables</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Example of Step 3 of Data Analysis .....	54

## **Chapter I: Introduction**

The primary focus of this project is on the experience of Black and White multiracial women living in the Pacific Northwest region regarding their physical appearance. This population is important to study for several reasons. To begin, the racial demographic trajectory of the multiracial population in the United States is expected to rise exponentially (Masuoka, 2008). Masuoka suggested that by 2050 the multiracial population will make up approximately 21% of the U.S. population. Second, there is a racial disparity among Blacks and Whites in the U.S. that includes a tumultuous history of racial hierarchy and categorization (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009). Last, because the status as a legitimate legally recognized population (Black and White-multiracial) has reoccurred only relatively recently, research on this population is still limited. In exploring this history further, Chapter II will first discuss the racial categorization of U.S. citizens and the legal recognition of the multiracial population. That chapter will then address the research literature on Black and White multiracial adolescents and young adults' psychological well-being relative to their self-perception. This information is expected to provide the reader with a better understanding of what it means to be a Black and White multiracial individual in the U.S. and how racial self-identification may influence body image.

American psychologists and researchers are attuned to the importance of culture and conceptualizing the mixed-race population (Bradshaw, 1992; Rockquemore et al., 2009). They have also acknowledged the necessity of offering competent psychological services for inadequately represented groups, such as the multiracial population (Gillem & Thompson, 2004). In assisting multiracial individuals to obtain and sustain a balanced

perception of self-image, the strengths, as well as the socially constructed challenges of what it means to be multiracial need to be considered and explored (Edwards & Pedrotti, 2004). According to Bradshaw (1992), to have a complete understanding of the multi/biracial experience, it is important to

account for the effects of social and institutionalized racism, false assumptions about racial purity, and interpersonal and familial factors that affect resolution of self identity and racial identity [because] the biracial person bridges and titrates the experience of both belonging nowhere and negotiating some belonging everywhere. (pp. 78–79)

### **Race and Body Image**

Despite the growing population rate, and the necessity for mental health professionals to have a thorough understanding of the multiracial experience, there is limited research among this population. What has been identified is that adjectives such as *exotic*, *beautiful*, or *fascinating* have been used to describe multiracial women (Bradshaw, 1992). Negative adjectives such as “Other” have also been used to describe multiracial individuals (Bradshaw, 1992; DaCosta, 2007; Root, 1990b). The impact these terms have on body image satisfaction or dissatisfaction for Black and White multiracial young adult women is not well developed and will be explored in Chapter II. Therefore, examining body image in Black and White multiracial women is an attempt to begin filling this knowledge gap. Such information is important and needed for several reasons. First, although there are contradictory findings, there is research suggesting that some multiracial adolescents display difficulties in forming an adequate sense of self and identity development (Cheng & Lively, 2009; Herman, 2008; Terry & Winston, 2010). Second, low body esteem is a risk factor in the development of eating disorders (Schwitzer, 2012). Third, many studies examining body image concerns and eating

disorders have not included multiracial Black and White women (Ivezaj et al., 2010).

Fourth, some of the research identified contradicts the stereotype that only White women are affected with body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Smith, Thompson, Raczynski, & Hilner, 1999; Wilfley et al., 1996). Finally, with the growing rate of the mixed-race population, many clinical psychologists are likely to see an increase in multiracial clientele for assessment and treatment. In providing adequate treatment it is imperative that psychologists have an understanding of the nexus between race and body image, which is the basis of this research study.

### **Research Design Overview**

This study explores Black and White multiracial women's subjective experiences and perceptions regarding their body image. For this study, body image phenotype characteristics include, but are not limited to skin color, hair texture, facial features, and physique. A descriptive phenomenological approach developed by Giorgi (2009) is used to explore the lived experience from the participants' point of view.

In a qualitative research design, participant selection is purposeful instead of random so that deeper understanding can be obtained (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2007). Therefore participants' inclusion criteria are:

- All participants will have self-identified as Black and White multiracial.
- All participants will be between the ages of 18 and 30 years old at the time of the interview.
- All participants will live in the Pacific Northwest.
- All participants will be women.

Data collection will consist of in-depth, audio-recorded, face-to-face interviews with six participants. All of the research records will be kept at Antioch University, Seattle in a secured file cabinet for eight years, per the Washington Administrative Code 246-924-354 Maintenance and retention of records, after which confidential data will be properly disposed of. Dedoose, an online textual analysis software program that is password protected and secure, was used to analyze the data. This information is described in greater detail in Chapters III, IV, and V.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

The term *multiracial* is defined as a person of two or more races and will be used interchangeably with biracial (Cheng & Lively, 2009; Root, 1992). In 2010 it was estimated that approximately nine million multiracial persons live in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2012). This is a 32% increase from the 2000 U.S. Census, with 92% of multiracial respondents checking just “two races.” In the same 2010 Census, 1.8 million identified as multiracial Black, with 45% self-identifying as Black and White (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Within the Pacific Northwest region, specifically Seattle, Washington, the 2010 population count revealed 608,660 people, with 5.1% selecting two or more races (City of Seattle, Office of Planning and Community Development, 2016). Moreover, the multiracial population is listed as one of the fastest growing groups in the past decade (City of Seattle, 2016).

Prior to the year 2000, if the options given on the U.S. Census were not in accordance with a person’s self-identified race, particularly Black/White individuals post-1950, they were to choose “other,” a catch-all category conveying little to no meaning (DaCosta, 2007; Nagai, 2010). In response to this inaccurate representation, the multiracial community began pushing for a change in the way U.S. Census respondents could answer the race question (DaCosta, 2007). Multiracial representatives suggested that adding either a “multiracial” option or allowing for the selection of all applicable racial categories would offer better recognition of this growing population (DaCosta, 2007). In response, “the 1993 U.S. House Subcommittee on Census, Statistics, and Postal Personnel held a hearing to discuss the racial and ethnic categories to be used in the 2000

Census” (DaCosta, 2007, p. 1). One of the primary concerns discussed in this hearing was whether or not the current Census listing of racial categories was adequately representing America’s population (DaCosta, 2007).

### **Faces of the United States**

The U.S. Decennial Census has a long history in America, but only recently has the multiracial population received legal recognition. In 2000, it had been 150 years since Blacks and Whites or Mulattoes, a term once used to describe individuals of Black and White ancestry, were recognized on the U.S. Census (Nagai, 2010). The first U.S. Census in August of 1790 only had White as a race option that neglected all other races. Then in 1850, Mulatto was added to acknowledge Black and White mixed-race individuals, and in 1870 the U.S. Census Bureau further categorized the American population into five races: White, Colored (Blacks), Colored (Mulattoes), Chinese, and Indian (Nagai, 2010; Spickard, 1992). Although Black and White mixed-race individuals were recognized as a distinct racial category, they were still regarded as colored (Spickard, 1992). By 1950 the U.S. Census racial categories were changed to White, Black, and Other. Then in 1980 the categories changed even more dramatically to White, Black, Hispanic, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, American Indian, Asian Indian, Hawaiian, Gumanian, Samoan, Eskimo, Aleut, and Other (Spickard, 1992; United States Census Bureau, 2012). Together, the changes made between 1950 and 2000 on the U.S. Census delegitimized Black and White biracial people and rejected people of all other mixed races. The changes listed on the U.S. Census over the years reflected the shift in America’s population, as well as its “social, economic, and political reality” (Spickard, 1992, p. 18).



According to Root (1992), the purpose of racial categorization has been to differentiate one from another to allocate privileges, as well as to impose hierarchical categorization, such as inferiority and superiority. Hypodescent, also referred to as the “one-drop” rule, is a long-persisting phenomenon that was both legal and customary, in which people with any known African ancestry were regarded as Black (Spickard, 1992). According to Nash (as cited in Root, 1996), this categorizing attempted to ensure the purity of the White race and ultimately became the basis for legal and informal barriers to equality in both public and private facilities, such as bathrooms, restaurants, academic institutions, and governmental agencies, including the right to vote (Root, 1996). Although hypodescent was conceived during 17th- and 18th-century America, Louisiana in 1983 was the last state to repeal the hypodescent legislation (Snipp & Leibler, 2012). However, hypodescent is sometimes still considered a normative practice for some Blacks and Whites (Snipp & Leibler, 2012).

In June of 1967, state anti-miscegenation laws barring marriage between Whites and Blacks were repealed in the *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 United States 1 ruling (Daniels, as cited in *Loving v. Virginia*, 1967; Root, 1992). Upon the repealing of this law, the United States saw an increase of multiracial births. However, given the racial disparities and lack of legal representation until the year 2000, Black and White multiracial individuals encountered great difficulty in identifying as both races and were subsequently forced to identify as Black (Thornton, 1996). According to Root (1992), racially mixed persons defied

the social order predicated upon race, blur racial and ethnic group boundaries, and challenges generally accepted proscriptions and prescriptions regarding intergroup relations . . . [and] challenges long-held notions about the biological, moral and social meaning of race. (p. 3)

Although 2000 was the first year since 1850 that Black and White multiracial U.S. citizens were allowed the option of choosing more than one race on the Census (i.e., Mulatto), it was neither the rebirth nor conception of this population (Nagai, 2010; Rockquemore et al., 2009). In fact, “U.S. history repeatedly demonstrates an ambivalence about recognizing multiracial people” (Daniel, as cited in Root, 1996, p. xviii). The evolution of the U.S. Census is an example of this and is relative to the study of body image in multiracial Black and White women, because racial self-identity and how one is perceived by society likely influences their definition of beauty and what may or may not be attainable (United States Census Bureau, 2012). For example, a Black and White mixed-race woman who appears and is regarded by society as Black, but self-identifies as multiracial, may have difficulty achieving a balanced self-perception if there is no socially recognized category or label she can identify with, ultimately confirming the ambivalence in acknowledging the multiracial population.

### **Racial Identity Development**

A number of racial identity theories have existed throughout the years in an attempt to conceptualize multiracial identity development (Rockquemore et al., 2009). However, not all mixed-race individuals self-identify as multiracial (Rockquemore, 1999). For example, some Black and White multiracial individuals may self-identify as White, Black, biracial, or simply *human* (Rockquemore et al., 2009). How a person racially self-identifies influences their body image because it likely shapes the person’s definition of what physical characteristics equate beauty. Therefore, depending on how they racially identify that person may look to Whites, Blacks, or ambiguous figures for standards of beauty. As stated earlier there is an increased emphasis on appearance

among multiracial women and may cause a feeling of “otherness” (Bradshaw, 1992; Rockquemore, Brunσμα, & Feagin, 2008; Root, 1990b) According to Root (1990b) the multiracial individual becomes consciously aware of their “otherness” status in childhood when they encounter people who appear puzzled by their appearance, or make comments such as, “you are so interesting looking” or “Mixed Children are so attractive” (p.189). Research on how self-identified multiracial women perceive and subjectively experience their physical appearance is not well developed, and the goal of this study is to begin filling this knowledge gap.

**Multiracial identity conceptualization theories.** In their exploration of multiracial identity theory, Rockquemore et al. (2009) drew from Thorton and Wason (as cited in Rockquemore et al., 2009), who identified three categorical approaches of research on mixed-race identity: the problem approach, the equivalent approach, and the variant approach. The problem approach focused on the negative aspects, such as the problematic social position in being of both Black and White descent. This method of conceptualization grew out of the Jim Crow era, in which racial segregation and hypodescent were prominent. In the 1960s, the equivalent approach emerged, in which Black and White multiracial people were simply regarded as Black; that approach drew heavily “from Erikson’s (1968) developmental framework of ego-identity formation” (Rockquemore et al., 2009, p. 17). This approach asserted that because so many Blacks in the United States were racially mixed, it was unnecessary to make a distinction between individuals who were mixed by way of two monoracial Black and White parents.

In the mid-1980s and 1990s the variant approach emerged, in which the mixed-race population gained some recognition as a distinct racial group that held its own set of

challenges in racial identity development deserving of further research exploration.

During this same time, many Black and White multiracial children began challenging the hypodescent rule by

unsevering ties with their European American background and European Americans; they seek to do this without diminishing their affinity with the experience of African Americans. They achieve this by affirming an integrative identity that has both the black and white communities as reference groups; or a pluralistic identity that blends aspects of the black and white communities but is neither. (Daniel, 1996, p. 123)

According to Daniel (1996), multiracials achieve this by exercising an integrative identity that acknowledges the differences as well as the similarities in being of mixed race.

Even in challenging hypodescent, there were difficulties in socializing and raising a mixed-race child and adolescent (McRoy & Freeman, 1986). For many mixed-race children, their racial self-perceptions and identification were confusing both inside and outside the home. An example of this may have occurred when a mixed-race child was identified and socialized as one race (i.e., White) in the home, but regarded as Black outside of the home. Furthermore, “multiracial” as a racial category received little acknowledgement from educators, researchers, sociologists, and mental health professionals because it was a legally nonexistent category (Daniel, 1996). The mental health of Black and White multiracial children was often determined either successful or unsuccessful by how well the children incorporated a Black identity and denied their White ancestry (Daniel, 1996). According to mental health professionals, a “successful” identity was determined by how well Black and White multiracial children coped and identified themselves as Black, whereas an “unsuccessful” identity referred to children who did not cope and identify as such. This dichotomy of race neglected the idea of the child or adolescent integrating both races.

Rockquemore et al. (2009) later expanded upon Thorton and Wason's problem, equivalent, and variant approaches (Thorton & Wason as cited in Rockquemore et al., 2009). Following these approaches a more fluid, contextually based theory evolved called the ecological approach. In this approach, theorists believe that racial self-identity is neither linear nor predictable. This approach takes into account the differences in racial identity development and socialization, often dependent upon differing demographic locations and new research development on mixed-race individuals. The processes or models that make up the theories will be expounded upon in the subsequent Biracial Identity Development Models section. Irrespective of multiracial identity conceptualization theories, few biracial/multiracial identity development models exist in comparison to monoracial identity development models (Poston, 1990).

**Singular racial identity development models.** A variety of racial identity development models exist to help explain the processes that monoracial Black and White individuals go through in forming a sense of self and belonging (R. Hall, 2001; Poston, 1990). The monoracial Black and White identity racial development models presented in the following sections demonstrate the cognitive progression often encountered by individuals in their exploration of developing a cohesive sense of self in relation to others. Part of developing a cohesive sense of self or balanced self-image includes the examination of the person's body image. Individuals will often look to outside entities such as media sources and family members in guiding them in defining their standards of beauty. Therefore, how that person racially self-identifies is important because it assists the person in determining what attributes may or may not be attainable, which is likely to affect their body esteem.

***Black racial identity development.*** William E. Cross (1971) developed a five-stage model to help explain the processes that African Americans or Blacks go through in developing a sense of self. The development of this model came during the civil rights era, when the Black power movement was at its peak. Prior to 1968, psychological research regarding Black identity was nonexistent (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991). The stages of Cross's (1971) model are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. While individuals tend to move from one stage to the next, it is not uncommon for the person to regress to previous stages before transitioning to the next phase.

In stage one or pre-encounter, a person holds similar beliefs and values relative to the dominant White culture. The person in this stage is likely to think that being Black is problematic and includes a host of negative stereotypes. In an attempt to curb the internalized stigma associated with being Black, the individual in this stage will seek to assimilate and gain acceptance within the White culture while distancing themselves from the Black culture (Cross et al., 1991). In the encounter stage, the Black person is likely to have either experienced or vicariously endured racism, social rejection, and inequality by the dominant culture. As a result, the person realizes that racism exists and that they will not be regarded as White, but will instead shift their focus to forming a Black identity (Cross, 1971; Cross et al., 1991). In stage three, the immersion-emersion phase, an individual has a strong desire to surround themselves with symbols that clearly demarcate and glorify Blackness. The person in this stage will actively distance herself and avoid symbols relevant to Whiteness.

In moving toward the emersion phase, there is little anger experienced by the Black person toward the White person, because much of their energy has been directed to exploring the Black race and culture and its applicability to self-development. The internalization phase encompasses a person who holds a Black identity but is now able to effectively engage and establish meaningful relationships with Whites. Additionally, this individual may also build relations with individuals from other oppressed groups. The last stage is internalization-commitment. In this stage the self-identified Black person is comfortable with their racial identity and is committed to developing strategies in resolving the conflicts associated with the entire Black racial group. They are also more likely to be aware of other cultures and experiences aside from their own.

Western society tends to regard non-White individuals such as Blacks as a minority group (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998; Root, 1990a, 1990b). To account for the cognitive processes involved in minority racial and cultural identity development, Atkinson et al. (1998) developed a five-stage model. The stages include conformity, dissonance, resistance and emersion, introspection and synergetic articulation, and awareness. Embedded within these stages are various attitudes toward the self, toward others of the same and different minority groups, and toward the dominant racial group.

In the conformity stage, the person identifies more strongly with and is appreciative of the White culture. This process involves a self-deprecating attitude toward the self and others of the same racial background and a discriminatory attitude toward individuals from other minority groups. The dissonance stage encompasses psychological confusion and conflict about the beliefs and values of the dominant group. The individual is likely to begin questioning stereotypes and develop awareness of the ramifications

entrenched in the value and belief system of the dominant culture. The next stage is resistance and emersion. Here the person is more apt to actively disengage and reject the values and beliefs of the dominant culture. Instead this person has a desire to further explore their own culture's values, beliefs, and customs. The introspection stage involves an individual attempting to integrate their culture's values and beliefs with those of the dominant culture. This person may experience confusion as to how to effectively integrate the two, while remaining loyal to their cultural group. The final stage is synergetic articulation and awareness. In this stage, the individual has developed a healthy cultural identity that includes aspects from both the minority and dominant culture. This person may also attempt to better understand his or her own cultural values in relation to other minority groups.

Following the emergence of Black and minority identity development models were White identity development models (Helms, 1990; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994). Such models will be explored in the subsequent section and their relevance to mixed-race individuals and body image will be discussed.

***White racial identity development.*** White identity models have been proposed and discussed in the 1980s and 1990s by Helms (1984, 1990) and Rowe et al. (1994). Helms's (1990) model of White identity development is linear and has two phases, abandonment of racism and evolution of non-racist identity, each of which has three stages: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independent, immersion-emersion, and autonomy. In this model, individuals who self-identify as White are assumed to begin with racist viewpoints.



The first stage in the abandonment of racism phase involves coming into contact with Black people and other people of color. In this stage the person is likely oblivious or naïve to racism and issues relative to culture and race. The second stage involves disintegration; here the individual is aware of their White status as well as the associated moral dilemmas like discrimination toward people who are non-White. As a result, there is a sense of incongruence that results in psychological discomfort. To reduce this discomfort the person may avoid contact with Blacks or people of color, take measures to convince those closest to them that Blacks are not inferior, or seek information from Blacks or Whites to further understand racism. The last stage of this phase is reintegration. In this stage the person self-identifies as White and is cognizant of the dichotomy of White superiority and Black and other minority inferiority. This person may also perpetuate and or re-interpret information in an attempt to mold minorities into the prescribed societal stereotypes.

The second phase of Helms's (1990) model is evolution of a non-racist identity. The first stage in this phase is pseudo-independent; here the individual begins to question the White and minority inferiority and superiority concept. This process is achieved via the acknowledgement of racism, racial hierarchy and associated privileges or lack thereof, and the intellectual understanding of other cultures. The next stage is immersion-emersion, in which the individual attempts to positively re-define White identity by replacing erroneous myths and stereotypes of people of color with more accurate information of the White history on a global level. The final stage is autonomy. The person in this stage is now beginning to internalize and apply their new definition of a

White identity, in which there is no need to oppress or idealize racial groups because they no longer view other racial groupings as a threat.

The model postulated by Rowe et al. (1994) is more concerned with racial consciousness than identity. For Rowe et al., White identity development should not be considered a parallel process with minority identity development because of the differences in societal positions. Instead, Rowe et al.'s model is nonlinear and attempts to provide an understanding of the relationship between self-identified White and non-White individuals. Rowe et al. also postulated that previous White identity models focus more on the process that Whites go through in becoming aware of non-White persons, rather than actual White identity development.

However, race identity models such as those provided by Atkinson, Morten, & Sue (1998), Cross (1971), Helms (1990), and Rowe et al. (1994) ignore individuals who make up two or more racial backgrounds. To fill this knowledge gap, biracial identity development models have been generated (Poston, 1990; Rockquemore, 1999; Root, 1990b). Such models will be discussed in the following section, as well as a discussion of why singular racial identity development models may not always be applicable to the multiracial population.

**Biracial identity development models.** In 1937 Everett Stonequist introduced the marginal man model, which was the first model to focus on the biracial individual (Stonequist, 1961). This model postulated that these “marginal” individuals often display different psychological and social characteristics and never establish a firm identity; which according to Cheng and Lively (2009) is a “result of living across two or more social worlds with different racial traditions and unequal power” (p. 61).

The aforementioned monoracial development models by Atkinson et al. (1998), Cross (1971), and Helms (1990) have several limitations when applied to biracial persons (Poston, 1990). One of the most important aspects of singular racial identity formation is self-fulfillment, in which the person is one racial/ethnic identity while also becoming accepting of other races. Again, this notion is inherently problematic for a person with two or more races who chooses to identify as such, because these models do not recognize multiple racial/ethnic identities (Poston, 1990). Aware of the complexities associated with having a biracial makeup and lack of inclusion in previous racial identity development models, Poston introduced biracial identity development, a new and positive model. Root (1990b) and Rockquemore (1999) also discussed the concept of biracial identity development. Root (1990b) discussed the procedures involved in resolving the sense of being considered an “other,” while Rockquemore (1999) described four racial identity options for biracial persons.

Poston’s (1990) model has a life-span focus similar to other models and is broken down into five stages: personal identity, choice of group categorization, enmeshment/denial, appreciation, and integration. The personal identity stage typically includes individuals who are very young with minimal regard to what racial group they are part of or will identify as. This, however, is not to say that they are not conscious of race and ethnicity. Instead the foundation of their identity is rooted in their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth irrespective of their racial makeup. The next stage is choice of group categorization. In this phase the individual feels pressured to choose a singular race, which can result in feelings of alienation and become a time of psychological crisis. Hall (as cited in Poston, 1990) reported that the pressure to choose one race typically

came from societal pressures. Hall (as cited in Poston, 1990) found three factors that influenced which race a mixed person identified as—status factors, social support factors, and personal factors. Status factors include the racial makeup of the parents, the racial demographics of the neighborhood where the family resides, as well as the racial background and racial influence of the individual's peers. Social support factors include parenting styles and their influence, participation, and acceptance of other races and cultures. The personal factors include physical appearance, awareness of non-English languages and cultures, age, level of political involvement, and the varying degrees of individual personality differences. However, it is often the case that individuals who are of Black and White descent are typically not provided with the luxury to choose White as a race option because their physical appearance (i.e., hair texture, skin color, and facial features) may appear more Black or ambiguous to society. It is also possible that if the skin color of a Black and White mixed-race person is not dark enough, they may not gain inclusion into the Black community either.

In the enmeshment/denial stage, the individual is typically confused and experiences feelings of guilt for having to choose one race and neglect the other that result in an incomplete representation of their racial makeup. In addition, the person in this stage may experience self-hatred and feelings of inadequacy due to the lack of acceptance from one or more racial groups (Poston, 1990). Despite the conflicts encountered during this stage, some biracial individuals begin resolving their anger, self-hatred, and guilt by accepting and appreciating the racial differences of their parents. If resolution does not take place, the individual will stay at this stage.

At the appreciation stage, the individual accepts and appreciates their biracial makeup and may take interest in learning more about their racial heritages and cultures, yet they still tend to self-identify as one race. The final stage of Poston's (1990) model is integration. In this phase, the individual experiences a sense of integration and wholeness. In addition, the individual is likely to both recognize and value their biracial heritage and racial self-identity. Individuals in this stage may also know that they have a legitimate right to identify as White and Black because of their heritage and do not have to question themselves along the credibility criterion enforced by overt or implied hypodescent (Root, 1990b). This author must reiterate that even if the biracial individual is in the integration phase and identified as biracial, legal representation was not available until 2000. Therefore, only recently has the biracial individual been able to apply their internal integration of their racial makeup to external sources, such as the U.S. Census. For the purpose of this study, participants were in the integration stage of life, meaning that they have developed a biracial self-identity and identify as such when asked (i.e., "I am Black and White").

In her exploration of mixed-race individuals, Root (1990b) discussed the necessary, but rather difficult process in developing a positive and stable self-image in a dichotomous society of White and non-White. Similar to Poston's (1990) personal identity stage, the biracial child begins to become aware of their "other" status (Root, 1990b). This awareness typically comes to the forefront by way of their name, ambiguous physical features often highlighted by others (i.e., "Mixed children are so attractive" or "Where are you from?"), or having singular racial statuses placed upon them (Root, 1990b). In addition, the mixed-race child may be teased by fellow classmates for not

looking the part of one specific race; that will likely result in the mixed-race child becoming consciously aware of the race inferiority and superiority status. In this state, the child may express a desire to assume the more superior race and reject the inferior race, such as a Black/White child straightening their curly or kinky hair.

Familial roles are important components in assisting a child of any race to understand their heritage, particularly if they are regarded by society as “other.” However, for the biracial child this may be difficult because of the differences in treatment that monoracial Black and White parents may experience from their extended family, friends, and neighbors. To resolve the status of being considered an “other,” Root (1990b) provided four elements that are not mutually exclusive in developing a biracial identity; they include acceptance of the identity society assigns, identification of both racial groups, identification of a single racial group, and identification of a new racial group.

In the acceptance of the identity society assigns phase, the mixed-race person will adopt the racial group that they have been socialized to identify as either by their extended family or the one in which society has placed them. In the identification of both racial groups phase, the mixed-race person will self-identify as biracial. In addition, this person is likely to view their biracial status as positive that is both similar and different to people around them. Although this is the most ideal stage for a biracial person to be in, identifying as both races has not always been an option.

In the identification of a single racial group phase, the individual makes the conscious decision to identify as a single race regardless of the racial grouping their siblings self-identify as and/or which society imposes on them. Root (1990b) does not

consider this status as problematic, particularly if the person does not feel marginal and does not deny the other parts of their racial ancestry. However, identifying with a single-race group may not be acceptable to others when the mixed-race person's physical characteristics are not considered congruent by others or in regions where the crossing of racial lines is prohibited.

Finally, there is the identification of a new racial group. In this stage the mixed-race person feels exceptionally committed to their multiracial heritage and wishes to identify as such in all areas of their lives. However, if given the lack of opportunity to identify as two or more races, they are likely to be unable to develop a complete sense of belonging to one racial group. To counterbalance their marginal status, they choose to develop or identify as a new racial group, such as "human," and will inform those around them of the inaccuracies in placing them into one racial grouping.

Rockquemore (1999) posed four racial identity options for biracial persons, which include singular identity (Black or White); border identity (exclusively biracial); protean identity (sometimes Black, sometimes White, sometimes biracial); and transcendent identity (no racial identity). In her development of these four racial groupings, she comprehensively examined identity theories while also incorporating information provided by biracial individuals (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009). Rockquemore et al.'s (2009) exploration found that biracial identity development is more fluid than it is static.

The biracial identity development models or processes provided by Poston (1990), Root (1990b), and Rockquemore (1999) are imperative in understanding the processes involved in potentially forming a biracial self-identity. Even if the individual

does not encompass a biracial identity, these models offer insight into the uniqueness and complexities relevant to persons who are biologically made up of more than one race. Such complexities may include experiencing psychological difficulties at various points across the life span. One example, which can occur at any point in the life span, is when multiracial individuals are asked, “What are you?” or “Are you sure?” In response to these questions, this person may experience an increased emphasis on their physical appearance and realize that an otherness is being created based on their physical appearance (Bradshaw, 1992). As a result, this person may feel the need to racially identify and appear as the race society assumes they are or feel the pressured to produce a statement about racial identity. Again, it is important to reiterate that body image research in multiracial Black and White women has been explored only minimally and is the purpose of this research study.

### **Psychological Impacts on Multiracial Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults**

Researchers McRoy and Freeman (1986) and O’Donoghue (2005) suggested that racial self-identity issues psychologically impact mixed-raced children and adolescents who have both White and Black monoracial parents. According to Cheng and Lively (2009) and Herman (2008), racially mixed children experience more psychological distress than their monoracial counterparts. Cheng and Lively (2009) utilized the marginal man theory to guide their analysis. Cheng and Lively developed two questions. First, in what ways do self-identified multiracial adolescents differ from their monoracial counterparts in terms of psychological, social, and behavioral/educational outcomes? Second, to what degree are these differences reliant upon the type of adolescents’ multiracial self-identifications, such as Black/White, Asian/White, American



Indian/Black? Drawing upon these two questions and the marginal man theory, they offered the following hypotheses:

1. Multiracial adolescents are psychologically more distressed than their associated monoracial counterparts.
2. Multiracial youth may develop more friendships and participate in more social occasions than their associated monoracial counterparts. Corollary: Self-identified multiracial adolescents' subjective feelings about their social relations may be less positive than the actual friendship and social participation outcomes themselves.
3. Multiracial adolescents have more favorable achievement outcomes than their associated monoracial counterparts. (Cheng & Lively, 2009, pp. 68–69)

Their sample size consisted of 71,196 monoracials and 4,870 self-identified multiracial adolescent male and females, and they analyzed survey data from the 1995 Add Health, a school-based study designed to explore the health behavior of students in grades 7 through 12 (Cheng & Lively, 2009). They measured a total of 13 dependent variables in relation to the three hypotheses. For hypothesis 1, they investigated depression, self-deprecation, and feeling alienated in school. For hypothesis 2 and its corollary, they looked at the number of friends to discuss problems, number of non-sports clubs attended, number of sports teams attended, and whether or not they got along with peers and teachers. For hypothesis 3, they looked at behavioral problems, use of tobacco, alcohol, skipping school, average GPA, and educational expectations.

The results of this study supported the hypotheses that multiracial adolescents tend to have poorer outcomes than their monoracial counterparts. More specifically, and

in support of hypothesis 1, Cheng and Lively (2009) found that on average, Black/White biracial youth display an increase in depressive symptoms in comparison to their monoracial counterparts, suggesting that they fare less well in psychological health. In regards to hypothesis 2 and its corollary, they found that although multiracial youth have more social participations than their monoracial peers, their subjective feelings regarding these relations is less positive than their apparent sociability. Lastly, for hypothesis 3, the results demonstrated that multiracial adolescents except for American Indian/Black students have more behavioral problems and may have more negative educational outcomes.

These results support Cheng and Lively's (2009) hypotheses that on most occasions multiracial youth are psychologically distressed, have negative subjective feelings regarding their high volume of friendships, have increased behavioral problems, and have poor educational outcomes. One limitation to this study is that it was not longitudinal. It rested on what is happening in the present rather than following these adolescents to see whether their self-reported survey data change over time, particularly into young adulthood. Another limitation to the study is their lack of qualitative data in identifying any social or environmental factors. Irrespective of the adolescents' attempts to self-identify as Black and White multiracial, Terry and Winston (2010) suggested that forming a sense of self, particularly where adolescents classify themselves racially, can be complicated and tends to change over time, place, and social roles, yet is psychologically complex.

Lusk, Taylor, Nanney, and Austin (2010) argued that depression and self-esteem levels are closely related, but are primarily measured among monoracial individuals and

do not include persons who identify as multiracial. In their research of racial identity, they found that minority monoracial individuals who have a strong internalized self-identification report high levels of self-esteem, even with the exposure to racism, with the assumption being that their strong racial identity produces a buffer against negative self-esteem. Lusk et al. found that this can also be true among multiracial individuals, citing that developmental models of biracial identity suggest that the endorsement of both sides of one's biracial makeup is healthier than denying their biracial status and only identifying with one or no race. With these findings in mind, Lusk et al. (2010) derived four hypotheses:

1. Self-reported levels of ethnic identity will have a significant positive correlation with self-esteem scores.
2. Self-reported levels of ethnic identity will have a significant negative correlation with depression scores.
3. The selection of the border (exclusively biracial) or protean identities (sometimes biracial) will yield higher self-esteem scores than those who choose the singular identity (exclusively Black or exclusively White) or transcendent identity (no racial identity).
4. Endorsement of the border or protean identities will yield lower depression scores than those who endorse singular or transcendent identities.

Their sample consisted of 74 male and female self-identifying Black/White biracial individuals (Lusk et al., 2010). The majority of the participants were college graduates, while 35% had completed some college and 24% had started or finished high school. The mean age of participants in this study was 23.62 years old. Participants were

asked to respond to seven statements (for full list, see Lusk et al., 2010) regarding their racial identity, that is, “I consider myself exclusively black (or African American), I sometimes consider myself black, sometimes my other race, and sometimes biracial depending on the circumstances” (p. 114). Following the 2001 Brunsma and Rockquemore study, Lusk et al. created four racial categories: “singular identity (i.e., Black or White; statements 1 and 5); border identity (i.e., exclusively biracial; statements 3 and 4); protean identity (i.e., sometimes Black/White, sometimes Black, sometimes White; statement 2); and transcendent identity (i.e., no race—human; statement 6)” (p.114) and placed each individual according to their racial identity responses. To measure the individual’s ethnic identity, the researchers used the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), a 12-item assessment of self-identification, ethnic identity, and affirmation/belonging. Next they measured for self-esteem and depression, using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), a 10-item self-report measure, and The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), a 20-item self-report measure, with both using a 4-point Likert-style response system (Lusk et al., 2010).

In collecting the above data, the researchers used an online format through a password-protected website associated with the second author of this study’s lab (Lusk et al., 2010). The results of this study were in support of all four hypotheses. They also identified a high number of individuals who chose a protean identity, in which their responses to the race question are more fluid than static. For Lusk et al. (2010) these findings suggest that the degree to which one feels a member of an ethnic group, such as African American, Barbados, West Indian, German, etc., may serve as a protective factor rather than the race with which one self-identifies.

Current research proposed by Franko and Roehrig (2011) and Crowther and Williams (2011) cited depression and self-esteem as important variables affecting an individual's perception of his or her physical appearance. According to Hall (2004), one's perception of his or her physical appearance is often considered one of the major factors affecting the life of an individual. In light of this information, understanding body image is particularly important because of the ramifications associated with body dissatisfaction. For example, body dissatisfaction may lead to depression, low self-esteem, and the development of an eating disorder (Hall, 2004). Understanding body image among Black and White multiracial women is the basis of this research study. Therefore the subsequent section will address the role that physical appearance plays in the United States.

### **Body Image in the United States**

Although the study of body image and esteem are important, there is little research on this topic among Black and White multiracial young adult women. Body image is defined as the physical appearance of a person's body, including appearance as perceived by others or imagined by the self (Cash, 2008; Cash & Smolak, 2011). Vinkers, Evers, Adriaanse, and de Ridder (2012) suggested that low body esteem, interpersonal issues with parents, perfectionism, sexual victimization, and low self-esteem, are risk factors in developing an eating disorder. Additional risk factors include a family member having an eating disorder and environmental and societal pressures, such as what is seen in sports and media (Schwitzer, 2012). One risk factor particularly relative to multiracial individuals is the increased attempt by others to racially categorize them by way of questions such as "What are you?" or "Are you sure?" Bradshaw (1992) asserted that in

response to such questions, multiracial persons might experience an “exaggerated emphasis on physical appearance” (p. 77). This exaggeration takes the form of being judged and or desired by others using terms such as *exotic*, *beautiful*, and *fascinating*.

According to Hall (2004), “multiracial women may attempt various means to be socially accepted” (p. 239), such as learning about Black culture, attempting to make one’s self look more White, and acting Black or White. Some of the characteristics multiracial women focus on in their attempt to look White include “body size and structure, name, language ability, and level of acculturation and or assimilation” (Hall, 2004, p. 80). This attempt to be socially accepted may be explained by an earlier study by Brunσμα and Rockquemore (2001). They suggested that a young adult who self-identifies as biracial is often determined by how others racially perceive their appearance (i.e., Black, White, or ambiguous).

Although the aforementioned risk factors can affect men and women of all races, it is often suggested that body image distortions and eating disorders primarily affect White adolescent girls (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014). It is important to note, however, that the majority of the research about body image tends to compare only monoracial White and Black individuals (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014). According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders ([ANAD], 2016), nearly 30 million men and women in the United States are living with an eating disorder. Moreover, eating disorders have the highest mortality rate compared to any other mental illnesses, due to life-threatening complications of the liver and kidneys. Other complications include cardiac arrhythmias, dental problems, and ruptures or tears in the esophagus (Harvard Health Publications, 2012). One of the core symptoms of an eating disorder is body

image distortion (Castellini et al., 2012). Therefore, understanding body image concerns may give insight regarding the etiology and treatment of eating disorders (D. Smith et al., 1999). Tiggemann (as cited in Espejo, 2010) asserted that “appearance in general and body image in particular have become very important constructs in contemporary Western societies” (p. 12). Moreover, American women are socialized to be overly concerned with physical appearance and attractiveness (Buckley & Carter, 2004).

Currently, there exists a plethora of images that define and portray female beauty in an unrealistic and unattainable manner (Anderberg, as cited in Espejo, 2010; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012). This portrayal of female beauty has led many women to experience low body esteem and an increased desire to be thin, resulting in women engaging in extreme dieting behaviors, cosmetic surgery, and the spending of countless dollars on clothes and beauty products (Anderberg, as cited in Espejo, 2010; Tiggemann, as cited in Espejo, 2010). It is estimated that Americans spend billions of dollars on reconfiguring of women’s bodies, “an industry solely dependent on women’s self-hatred” (Espejo, 2010, p. 73). Media, as well as the fashion industry, have played a major role in U.S. women’s poor body esteem and the rise of eating disorders (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Hellmich, as cited in Espejo, 2010). The women most often portrayed in fashion shows, magazines, music videos, television commercials, and movies are exceptionally thin and White. This characterization of beauty is often considered the gold standard of attractiveness, and women all across America are consistently bombarded with such images.

D. Smith et al. (1999) examined body image in Black and White men and women. Their results indicated that Black women were more preoccupied with appearance than

White men and women. Additionally, it was determined that Black women and White women had a similar dissatisfaction with body size. This finding is congruent with Wilfley et al. (1996), who also found comparable levels of body image dissatisfaction among Black and White monoracial individuals. These findings are contrary to the findings of Franko and Roehrig (2011), as well as a *Washington Post* poll asserting that Black women are less preoccupied with body image and are often more comfortable with a higher body weight in comparison to White women (O'Neal Parker, 2012). Although these studies have contradictory findings, this research suggests that women of color are not immune from perceiving their physical appearance in a negative manner.

Ivezaj et al. (2010) included multiracial individuals in their examination of the relationship between binge-eating, weight status, depression, anxiety, and body image. It is also important to note that because only 6% of the participant sample identified as multiracial, the results are not interpretable for the multiracial population. However, this study's findings are intriguing, as they suggest that overweight multiracial and White women engaged in binge-eating behaviors and reported greater body image dissatisfaction in comparison to Black women and men. Regarding body image, there was not enough evidence to support that the multiracial individuals included in this study experienced their physical experience negatively or positively, and the results of these studies point to possibilities for future inquiry: Do multiracial women feel compelled to contend with the White ideal of beauty? Do these women attempt to seek affirmation of beauty to counterbalance racial ambiguity? Do they attempt to bridge multiple notions of beauty via multiple points of identity?



The literature presented here suggests that multiracial persons, particularly those who self-identify as Black and White, tend to display a cohesive and healthy identity. However, this cannot be generalized to all Black and White multiracial persons, given the limited amount of research conducted with this population. The literature presented thus far lends light to the idea that multiracial persons are aware of their physical appearance; however, how some multiracial Black and White women subjectively experience their physical appearance has yet to be explored. Therefore, I explored six Black and White multiracial women's subjective experiences and perceptions regarding their body image. The subsequent chapter discusses the method that was most suitable for this exploration.

### Chapter III: Methodology

#### Qualitative Research

One of the primary goals in qualitative research is to explore and understand individual meaning (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Qualitative research is a social science that answers questions that quantitative research cannot, such as *why* and *how* (Giorgi, 2009). Qualitative research is also appropriate when quantitative measures will not suffice. Finally, within the process of research, qualitative inquiry is useful when there is a dearth of research in setting a conceptual foundation for future quantitative research. Key features of qualitative research include quality, meaning, explication, intentional responses, and participant observation (Giorgi, 2009). Qualitative research takes place in a naturalistic setting versus a laboratory and is primarily focused on understanding how participants perceive and make meaning of their experience(s) (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Patton, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The qualitative researcher is the key instrument in collecting data, through observations, examination of documents, and interviewing participants. It is suggested that gathering data in the field via in-depth interviews and observations highlights the uniqueness of each individual and captures the complexity of the issue and other contributing factors that quantitative research cannot measure or quantify (Giorgi, 2009; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

The process in which qualitative research is conducted is called induction (Patton, 2002). Induction is defined as a bottom-up approach that does not draw from a particular theory or from the perspective of the researcher (Creswell, 2009). Instead the inductive process progresses from specific statements and observations to more broad generalizations of meaning or theory (Patton, 2002). Inductive research is exploratory;

therefore, it is not uncommon for research questions to change in the midst of the study to gain a better understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). Additionally, this process waits for patterns and meanings to emerge and evolve. It is not hypothesis driven and is primarily interested in the perspectives and experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002).

Utilizing a qualitative methodology in the understanding of body image is most appropriate because it seeks to obtain a deeper understanding of the problem rather than solely providing statistics on the issue. Moreover, examining how one perceives and experiences his or her body is exceptionally personal, yet is essential to the understanding of body esteem in Western society in which the standards of beauty are often unobtainable. As stated previously, the aim of this study is to explore Black and White multiracial women's subjective experiences and perceptions regarding their body image. In this study, body image will include the participants' thoughts and perceptions about their skin color, hair texture, and physique. An individual's body image is best described as a personal relationship with oneself (Cash, 2008). More specifically, "*Body image* refers to how you personally experience your embodiment . . . encompassing your perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and actions that pertain to your physical appearance" (Cash, 2008, p. 1).

### **Concept of Knowing**

Carl Rogers (1963) defined the concept of knowing as hypotheses consistently being checked in various ways and subdivided into subjective, objective, and phenomenological knowledge. Rogers (1963) noted that psychological theory and research attempts to avoid and distance itself from subjective and phenomenological

knowledge and understanding primarily seen in qualitative research. According to Giorgi (2009), until the mid-19th century most psychological knowledge was classified as qualitative, but soon changed when psychology strived to be considered a science.

Between objective and subjective knowledge lies interpersonal knowing, “which applies primarily to knowledge of human beings and the higher organisms” (Rogers, 1963, p. 77). Interpersonal knowing, like objective and subjective knowing, also begins with a hypothesis that is to be checked. The term hypothesis in this context should not be confused with the term used in quantitative research. For example, given the literature reviewed in Chapter II, I can infer that I “know” Black and White multiracial women are consciously aware of their physical appearance, but whether their experience is positive or negative has yet to be checked, given the lack of research with this population. The process of discovering and explicating such information requires a methodology such as the one that will be discussed in Chapters IV and V. The goal of interpersonal knowing is to promote the field of psychology’s knowledge of the human being and

to limit oneself to consideration of externally observable behaviors, to rule out consideration of the whole universe of inner meanings, of purposes, of the inner flow of experiencing, seems to me to be closing our eyes to great areas which confront us when we look at the human world. (Rogers, 1963, p. 80)

Ignoring the interpersonal or phenomenological meaning of this group of women would be doing a disservice to this growing population because there is currently a significant lacking of existing literature on Black and White multiracial women and body image.

### **Qualitative Philosophical Assumptions**

With qualitative research there are philosophical assumptions that guide the development of the research question, the method for data collection and analysis, and the findings (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Qualitative research primarily focuses on the participants' experiences of reality. Therefore, researchers will often convey information in a personal and literary form. Moreover, the definitions obtained tend to emerge during the study rather than being defined at the outset of the study. Examples of this include the use of the first-person pronoun "I," as well as the telling of stories with a beginning, middle, and end. Additionally, qualitative researchers will distance themselves from quantitative terms, such as "internal validity, external validity, generalizability, and objectivity" (Creswell, 2007, p. 18). Instead, terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, validation, understanding, discover, and meaning are used (Angen, 2000; Schwandt, as cited in Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Ensuring Credibility, Dependability, and Transferability of Data**

A core focus in qualitative research is to provide the reader with enough evidence, descriptions, and analysis that an accurate representation of the participants' account of reality is generated. To ensure that this occurs, the information obtained from participants is verified by the individual(s) to determine whether the researcher's understanding is correct. For this study, I employed member checking during the analysis phase, which will be described in greater detail in Chapter V. The purpose of member checking is

to ensure that the researchers' own biases do not influence how participants' perspectives are portrayed, and to determine the accuracy of the findings, make use of "member checks," which entails sending the transcribed interviews or summaries of the researcher's conclusions to participants for review. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113)

Utilizing this approach for credibility or accuracy will ensure that the researcher's perspectives are bracketed and that the only data presented are those provided by the

participants. This approach also guarantees that the data obtained during the interview were accurate.

With regards to ensuring credibility, qualitative researchers utilize a methodological aid termed bracketing. Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) described bracketing as a process in which the researcher suspends and disengages from all previous knowledge regarding the phenomena at the time of study. Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) and Giorgi (2009) stated that all previous information remains bracketed throughout the study. It is in the Discussion section that the researcher will provide empirical variations and reflections of the findings in terms of their psychological meanings and implications (Giorgi, 2009).

Dependability refers to the processes and procedures used for data collection and interpretation, which will be explained in greater detail in Chapters IV and V (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Additionally, findings in qualitative research are not expected to be transferable to all other settings. Instead, it is

about how well the study has made it possible for readers to decide whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding in depth how they occur at the research site. Thus transferability refers to the fit or match between the research context and the contexts as judged by the reader. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113)

This entire process ensures that the qualitative study results provide a detailed, holistic, and realistic contextual picture (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). It is hoped that the research results provide the reader with an element of shared and/or vicarious experience. The subsequent chapter will discuss the method that this study utilized to obtain the holistic picture of how Black and White multiracial adult women experience and perceive their body.

## **Chapter IV: Method**

### **Research Philosophy: Phenomenology**

Phenomenology refers to the process of investigating experiences and obtaining and relaying the core “essence” of that experience as described by the research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). More specifically, phenomenology is concerned with describing what is presented to one’s consciousness and how it is presented (Giorgi, 2009).

Phenomenological philosophy was first introduced by Johann Goethe (1749–1832) and was later expanded upon by Franz Brentano (1838–1917) and Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) (Giorgi, 2010). For Husserl, phenomenology as a philosophy is the attempt to understand anything experienced via consciousness, such as an object, person, or situation, which is then analyzed by the experiencer (Giorgi, 2009). In this sense, then, it is consciousness that makes objects become present. The philosophical phenomenological perspective requires that the object presented to consciousness be described and analyzed by the same person. The object, person, or situation is considered a “given” or phenomenon, and phenomenology is concerned with how an individual experiences that “given.” According to the philosophical phenomenological perspective, research regarding psychological phenomena is capable of meeting the standards of scientific research (Applebaum, 2012; Giorgi, 2009). Utilizing a phenomenological approach is considered to be more comprehensive than empirical research because it is not exclusive of irreal objects (Giorgi, 2009). An irreal object is defined as anything that is not located in space or time and regulated by causality; examples include ideas,

meanings, dreams, memories, and images. In this sense, then, a phenomenon is anything that has the ability to present itself to one's consciousness.

The assumption embedded within this philosophy is that knowledge cannot be gained or spoken about unless it is first presented into one's consciousness. Thus, if the goal of science is to achieve knowledge, one must understand how the phenomenon is experienced and presented to consciousness. According to Giorgi (2009), "consciousness enacts a signifying act, which establishes a meaning that seeks to be fulfilled, that is directed toward an object that will completely [and precisely] satisfy its specific but empty meaning" (p. 133). For example, to obtain and describe the concept of what it means for a Black and White multiracial adult woman to experience her body and present this information as knowledge, it is imperative to understand how her physical appearance consciously presents itself and that this experience is then described.

In the field of psychology, there has been much debate as to whether or not precise or clear-cut knowledge is to be laboratory based, but for Husserl (as cited in Giorgi, 2009), natural or world knowledge is conceived and remains within experience. In his book *Logical Investigations*, Husserl (as cited in Giorgi, 2009) discussed science's repeated attempts toward knowing, but ignoring the acts required to obtain knowledge. For Husserl, all knowledge, scientific or otherwise, requires evidence in determining what *is* and *is not*. In this sense, knowledge requires evidence derived from specific methods and is separated from information acquired from baseless opinion. That is, if knowledge is to be transformed into truths, methodical procedures must be implemented (Giorgi, 2009).



Following the points made above, Giorgi (2009) asked if experimentation is the only method of achieving precise and stable knowledge. According to him, this is dependent on the phenomenon being studied. In the case of how Black and White multiracial adult women experience their physical appearance, taking a phenomenological approach is most appropriate because quantitative measures will not obtain a rich depiction, such as the meaning attached to the phenomenon.

There are a number of different ways to approach a phenomenological investigation. However, if the researcher's goal is to conduct a phenomenological analysis relevant to psychology that is not philosophically based, Giorgi (2009) suggested that modifications to Husserl's method be made. Therefore, I chose to use Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological research method (DPRM). This approach is closely related to Husserl's philosophical phenomenological method, which was briefly described above, but with some modifications (Giorgi, 2009; J. Smith et al., 2009). For Giorgi (2010), it was important to develop a method flexible enough for students writing dissertations. According to Giorgi (2010), his approach is psychologically sensitive and operates at a scientific level of analysis versus a philosophical one (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Giorgi, 2009). Essentially, the researcher embodies a psychological perspective and provides special sensitivity toward the phenomenon so that the psychological dimensions of the participants' experiences can be adequately perceived. The psychological perspective is used in a generic form, free of theory-laden terms or ideas (Giorgi, 2009).

For this study, special sensitivity during the analysis process was given to body image, specifically, skin color, hair texture, and physique of the Black and White

multiracial woman. Finally, based on the methodical steps that were used, it is hoped that enriching information can be gathered.

### **Research Strategy: Descriptive Phenomenological Research Method**

For this research study, I employed a descriptive phenomenological research method (DPRM) developed by Giorgi (2009). According to Giorgi (as cited in Olive, 2008, p. 87), “a descriptive phenomenological approach is scientific; it is methodical, systematic, critical, and produces general findings.” Moreover, utilizing this approach will allow the researcher the opportunity to holistically understand the individual (Giorgi, 2012). Obtaining this holistic picture is important because it considers the context in which the person resides, as well as how individual meaning-making is made and acted upon in everyday life (Taylor & Bogden, 1998).

For Giorgi and Giorgi (2008), DPRM follows the logic of discovery versus the logic of testing a hypothesis. The logic of discovery is concerned with exploring lived meanings relative to particular phenomena. Both Husserl and Giorgi assumed the idea that human experience is intelligible and that the logic of human experience is worth examining (Giorgi, 2009). In moving from a philosophical context to a scientific one, modifications to Husserl’s approach were made by Giorgi (2009). First, Giorgi’s (2009) DPRM allows for descriptive data to be obtained from others rather than from the researcher. Instead, the “analyses, the meanings, discriminations, and intuitions into eidetic data take place in the consciousness of the analyzer. Thus the results, in the form of structures of experiencing, come from the researcher, and in that sense satisfy phenomenological criteria” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 97).

Additional modifications made by Giorgi (2009) include assuming the human scientific (psychological) phenomenological reduction and the investigation of psychological meaning.

### **Phenomenological Reduction and Bracketing**

When conducting phenomenological analysis, it is imperative that the researcher assumes the correct attitude. Giorgi (2009) proposed that the researcher assume the human scientific (psychological) phenomenological reduction. This phenomenological reduction is most appropriate for the analysis of psychological phenomena among human beings because it seeks the meanings of the phenomena humans have experienced. In short, this level of analysis brings the researcher closer to the lived reality of the participants' experiences.

Regarding human scientific phenomenological reduction, it is not expected that the participant also assume the phenomenological attitude. Instead it is best if the participants remain naïve to phenomenological theories, terms, and concepts so that no bias toward what the researcher is seeking can occur. This is referred to as the natural attitude. Drawing information from phenomenologically naïve participants will provide the researcher with the experience as it is lived in the real world, which is often ambiguous and complex (Giorgi, 2009). Finally, it is presumed by Giorgi (2009) that while analyzing data within the phenomenological attitude, the researcher has the potential to better understand experiences within the natural or naïve attitude.

Assuming this phenomenological reduction attitude means that everything presented by the participant is to be accepted as how the participant actually experienced the phenomenon and will be included in the raw data (Giorgi, 2009). Furthermore, the

researcher does not claim that the experience described by the participant actually occurred as it was described; instead, the researcher takes the information as it is given. Within the phenomenological reduction, as the researcher I endeavored to suspend all personal experiences and past knowledge relative to the phenomena under investigation. Bracketing ensures that the participants' "personal acts of consciousness were enacted to allow the phenomenal intentional objects to appear" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 100). Throughout the analysis process, I enacted both the scientific phenomenological reduction and bracketing.

### **Psychological Meaning**

Once the description data are gathered, the researcher analyzes the data to acquire psychological meaning (Giorgi, 2009). In the philosophical phenomenology context, Husserl searched for essences via imaginative variation on the part of the analyst (Giorgi, 2009). Giorgi's (2009) method in obtaining such information is somewhat different. For example, Giorgi (2009) still requires that the researcher use free imaginative variation in making the implicit psychological meaning of the experience explicated. One difference is the terminology used so that scientists can more easily understand this approach. For Giorgi (2009), the term structure is used rather than essence. According to Giorgi (2009), there also exists a fundamental difference between essences and structures. The difference is that philosophers are seeking a universal essence, suggesting that the object would not exist without the characteristics within the essence (Giorgi, 2009). For Giorgi (2009), seeking a universal essence does not include the psychological nature of the phenomena. Therefore, the goal of the structure is to uncover and make explicit the

implicit psychological aspect of the phenomena as it is presented to the participants' consciousness.

Another difference between the philosophical essences and psychological structures obtained is the number of individuals from whom data are gathered (Giorgi, 2009). In the philosophical context, the data are gathered from one person, whereas in the psychological context, data are obtained from two or more individuals (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The goal then of the DPRM is to create a single structure that unifies the consciousness of each person in determining the general meaning of the phenomena. If a single structure is to be generated, the unity of consciousness of each participant must be respected and presented holistically and relationally. The psychological aspects then are considered a constituent of the entire description rather than just a part of the whole. In short, the single structure is made up of the relationship between constituents. It is, however, acceptable if a single general structure cannot be obtained, because relevant information based on these findings can still be meaningfully discussed.

The concepts associated with determining whether or not the data fit into a single general structure are intra-structural variability and inter-structural variability (Broome, 2011). Intra-structural variability refers to a single structure, whereas inter-structural variability refers to two or more structures. The general structure is defined as

a coherent statement of all the constituents in paragraph form, describing how the structure of the experience was lived by the participants in general. The general structure is the findings that are the basis for elaboration and discussion regarding the lived experience. (Broome, 2011, p. 144)

The primary reason for attempting to form a single general structure is that the transformed data of information are coming from the same population and data saturation

is expected. The subsequent chapter will discuss how the data were collected, including the interview prompts, subject selection, and the data analysis process per Giorgi (2009).

## **Chapter V: Procedures**

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this project consisted of in-depth, audio-recorded, face-to-face interviews with six participants. In qualitative research, selecting participants is purposeful (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2007). The goal of purposeful sampling is not to generalize findings, but to obtain insight and understanding regarding a particular phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). Therefore, the sample size is typically small, as opposed to what is seen in quantitative research. In utilizing purposeful sampling and studying a small number of participants, it is expected that the researcher will obtain information-rich cases via in-depth interviews and immersion into the participants' culture (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Dukes (as cited in Creswell, 2007) suggested studying three to 10 individuals, while Giorgi and Giorgi (2008), whose method I employed, suggested three participants for any thesis or dissertation. Giorgi and Giorgi's (2008) rationale for what some would consider a small number is how lengthy and labor intensive the data collection and analysis process could be.

For this study, six participants were interviewed and their data analyzed with one of the goals being data saturation. If saturation of the data had not been reached from the information obtained from the first six participants, then additional participant interviews would have been conducted and analyzed until a total of 12 participants had been interviewed. Data saturation is best described as occurring when the qualitative researcher no longer receives new information, but rather begins to notice similarities or analogous findings between what each participant is reporting regarding their experiences (Creswell, 2007).

In minimizing the risk of possible error or lack of understanding, I sought clarification of the analyzed data from the participants via member checking. I also made written descriptive observations that are psychologically relevant about the interviewee during the interview. All of the research records will be kept at Antioch University, Seattle in a secured file cabinet for eight years per the Washington Administrative Code Maintenance and retention of records 246-924-354, after which confidential data will be properly disposed of. If information is transported, it will be contained in a locked briefcase and encrypted and password protected on a USB drive. In analyzing the transcription data, I utilized Dedoose, a password-protected, secure computer software program specializing in qualitative research data. Using this software program enabled me to analyze, categorize, retrieve, and compare my data.

### **Data Analysis**

Giorgi (2009, 2010) identified three steps that the researcher must implement in analyzing the data upon verbatim transcription.

#### **Step One.** Read for the sense of the whole:

The researcher first assumed the attitude of scientific phenomenological reduction as well as bracketing personal experiences and previous knowledge about the phenomena, which is to be assumed throughout the analysis process. More specifically I worked to forgo any beliefs, perceptions, and feelings relative to the phenomena under investigation, in an attempt to be more open and neutral during the research process (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Moutaskas, 1994; J. Smith et al., 2009). I read and acknowledged all of the information precisely as it was given to me from the participants



and considered it a part of the phenomena (Giorgi, 2009). In this step I read the transcribed data to get a sense of what the participant was describing.

**Step Two.** Determination of meaning units:

The goal of a phenomenological analysis is to determine the meaning of the experience. With this goal in mind, I reread the written transcription and established units of meaning that are phenomenologically and psychologically relevant to the phenomena under investigation. Meaning units occur whenever the researcher experiences a significant transition in meaning of what has been described by the participant. When a transition in meaning occurred, I placed a marker next to the sentence(s) using Dedoose. This process resulted in participants' descriptions broken down into a series of meaning units.

**Step Three.** Transformation of participants' natural attitude expressions into phenomenologically psychologically sensitive expressions:

In this step, the researcher transforms the meaning units into psychologically sensitive statements (constituents) via the researcher's imaginative variation. In using imaginative variation it is assumed that there is psychological meaning embedded within the description that has not been made evident, and it is up to the researcher to discover this. The goal here is to make the implicit psychological meaning explicit and descriptive. More specifically, this step in the analysis process will reveal meanings that are lived, but not clearly articulated in the descriptions provided by the participants. The transformation of the participants' natural attitude expressions into phenomenologically psychologically sensitive expressions occurs via the researcher's consciousness.

For this step in the analysis procedure, I re-reviewed the data where the meaning units were identified in step 2, to ensure that my invariant or unchanged sense of the data grasped what the participants were conveying in their description. This process is to be repeated for every meaning unit found, which ensures accuracy in the researcher's experience in delineating the phenomenal characteristics within the participants' descriptions. To ensure that the transformed data accurately encapsulates each participant's earlier descriptions, I employed member checking, described in Chapter III. In short, the analyzed data were shared with each participant and they were asked to review the psychologically sensitive statements and affirm that the findings accurately reflected their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Had any of the participants disagreed with the findings, I would have re-analyzed the data and asked them to re-review it again. Finally, I used the transformed data to write the general structure of the experience for all six participants.

### **Subject Selection**

A purposeful sampling procedure was used in selecting this study's sample. For subject recruitment, a snowball sampling procedure was used. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), snowball sampling is defined as identifying participants unrelated to the researcher who possess certain characteristics. These participants are then requested to identify and refer others who possess the same or similar characteristics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

The criteria for selection of participants were as follows:

- All participants identified as Black and White multiracial.

- All participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 years old at the time of the interview.
- All participants lived in the Pacific Northwest.
- All participants were women.

In recruiting initial participants, I posted flyers on local college campuses as well as on the social media website Facebook; see Appendix A. It is also important to note that the race of the participants' mother and father is not applicable to the inclusion criteria because no research could be identified regarding monoracial parental figures of Black and White multiracial children, adolescents, or adults and their influence on body image.

### **Interview Prompts**

Participants in this study were asked to answer the following prompts (see Appendix B).

1. Introduction to this study: I am studying body image in Black and White multiracial women and I am interested in your perceptions and experiences as a biracial woman regarding your physical characteristics, such as hair texture, skin color, facial features, and physique.
2. Describe how you perceive your physical appearance, what do you see when you look in the mirror?
3. Describe your thoughts and feelings about your hair texture, skin color, facial features, and physique.

4. How does being a Black and White multiracial woman play a role in your thoughts and feelings about your hair texture, skin color, facial features, and physique?

In an attempt to gain full understanding, dependent on participant responses and as appropriate, I asked additional explorative questions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As the researcher, my first and foremost responsibility was to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of my participants (American Psychological Association, 2010; Creswell, 2007). The purpose of phenomenological research is to capture the lived experience of participants. Therefore, this type of research can be intrusive because it requires participants to provide detailed descriptions to a person (the researcher) whom they barely know. For example, this research study required face-to-face audio-recorded interviews, involving in-depth questioning. This research had the potential to uncover disordered eating and/or physical behaviors in the participants, which could require referrals for assessment and or treatment. Additionally, participants could leave this research with increased physical self-consciousness and fear of being objectified by the researcher and the audience reading this study.

Per the American Psychological Association ethical guidelines (8.02 Informed Consent to Research and 8.03 Informed Consent for Recording Voices and Images in Research) to safeguard participant information and participation, I followed these guidelines:

1. Participants were made aware of whom they could contact for questions about the research and their rights as participants.

2. The research objectives such as the purpose of the study, expected duration, and the right to decline to participate or withdraw were articulated verbally and in writing to ensure participant understanding.
3. Participants were given verbal and written clarification of how data will be used.
4. Participants gave verbal and written permission (see Appendix C) to participate and proceed with this study.
5. Participants were informed of data collection devices, such as the use of an audio-recording device.
6. Verbatim transcriptions and written interpretations were made available to participants.
7. Participants were made aware that this researcher utilized Dedoose in transcribing and analyzing interview data with names redacted.
8. Participant identification remained anonymous. Instead, participants were given a pseudonym. However, there was a discussion of the limits to confidentiality.
9. Participants were made aware of any prospective research benefits, as well as incentives for participation, if any.
10. Participants were made aware of any foreseeable factors that might be expected to influence their willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects.

## Chapter VI: Results

In analyzing this data, units of meaning were delineated that were psychologically relevant to the phenomena under investigation—perceiving and experiencing physical appearance as a Black and White woman living in the Pacific Northwest. Of the meaning units identified, 12 constituents were found: Am I exotic?, Ambiguous hair texture, Dealing with my hair, Does a biracial beauty standard exist?, Feeling marginal, Love/Hate relationship with physical features, Physical features I want to change, Race and physical appearance in America, Racially categorized by others, Unearned power and privilege, Other vs. self-identification, and Unique insights of Black/White biracial participants on societal beauty. These 12 constituents were then categorized into three overarching themes: sociopolitical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Together, these findings make up the general structure, which is a second-order description from that of the researcher, emphasizing the psychological understanding of how Black and White multiracial women's experiences and perceptions of their physical appearance present themselves to their consciousness.

Table 1 depicts the applied data analysis process of Giorgi (2009) that leads to specific key constituents and overarching themes. Upon further analysis and determination of the most psychologically relevant or truly essential constituents, the general structure is formed. The general structure of the experience, as described by Giorgi (2009), is not only the relationship among pertinent constituents, but

is a way of understanding the unity of the concrete data. It is a way of understanding why diverse facts and concrete details can belong to the same phenomenon. It is something like a measure of central tendency in statistics. (p. 200)

It is also important to note that all 12 constituents and overarching themes are equally

important and rather intertwined. Therefore, they are listed in no particular order or ranking. A discussion of each overarching theme as well as a description of each constituent is provided, which includes exemplary quotes that support each one.

Table 1

*Example of Step 3 of Data Analysis*

Meaning Unit	First Transformation of the Meaning Unit	Second Transformation of the Meaning Unit	Transformed Meaning Unit(s) Combined into Key Constituents & Overarching Theme
Well, it's kind of been like an evolving image I guess; now when I look in the mirror, I see kind of, my own self-constructed image in a way. Because like, I naturally have curly hair but I usually straighten it and so, I guess I see someone who looks a lot more like, unknown or who can fit in, like, many different categories. And I think I feel like, safe in that image. (P1, line 10)	Well, it's kind of been like an evolving image she guess; now when P1 looks in the mirror, she sees kind of, her own self-constructed image in a way. Because like P1, naturally have curly hair but she usually straighten it and so she guess she sees someone who looks a lot more like, unknown or who can fit in like many different categories. And P1 think she feels safe in that image.	When P1 alters her hair she sees an ambiguous figure, one that she has consciously created, that can fit into many different racial categories. P1 finds this comforting.	<p><b>Intrapersonal</b></p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>Ambiguous Hair Texture</b></p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>General Structure</b></p>



## **Sociopolitical Influences**

As aforementioned, despite that black and white multiracial individuals have been part of the population of the United States over the course of its history, it was not until 2000 that this population was legally recognized on the United States Census. However, it was not uncommon for participants in this research study to still encounter surveys requesting demographic data without the option for identifying as more than one race. In addition, many of them also experienced having others racially identify them on a consistent basis because of their varying physical features. This reality often left participants feeling “othered” by society, particularly when terms like *exotic* were used to describe them or they were told they appeared or behaved more White, Black, or Hispanic. This phenomenon left many questioning their identity and place in society. On the contrary, however, most participants agreed that because of their lighter skin tone they were able to reap some benefits, such as minimal racial profiling and being regarded by others as beautiful, that their monoracial Black counterparts in particular do not experience. Data analysis of this research study revealed the following six constituents and supporting quotes that highlight and confirm some of the influential social and political factors regarding race and body image in the United States.

**Unearned power and privilege.** Participants discussed the idea that biracial individuals hold special privileges in American society because of their lighter skin tone. Despite the privileges encountered, many of them often felt uncomfortable, because to them these privileges are unique and unearned. Some of the women also discussed being treated more favorably than their Black monoracial peers and having to worry less about racial injustices.

And two, I thought it was kind of unfair. I mean, a lot of times I still think that it's unfair that in a way, being mixed, I can, like . . . I feel like I can hide so much more easily and get so much more attention than, say, someone who's, like, completely black. And so that always felt unfair because I felt like they were like, "Oh, because you're half, like, you have tan skin or brown skin, and so, you're just, like, interesting enough for us to, like, want to pay attention." But if it had been, like, any darker, they probably wouldn't or they would be less interested and so there, it just always felt like this kind of sadness about that, if that makes any sense. And so, yeah. So, like, in kind of this guilty feeling, like, I was kind of like capitalizing on the fact that I was mixed. But knowing that, like, there is still people who like couldn't capitalize on that and, like, who, you know, just had it far worse in that department, and so that's where I think the love-hate relationship came in. (P1, line 210)

So some ways that they funnel in or some ways that I notice that they start to kind of come up is like sometimes when I'm driving I think about like that cop is not going to pull me over because he doesn't think that I'm black or like that lady is going to be really nice to me because she thinks that I'm white, so like those kinds of thoughts do happen to me all the time. So those kinds of thought do come into my mind quite a bit in class I think about all the time, especially at [school] I used to think like I'm not reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and they said the "N" word and I sit there and I think is everybody thinking about me in this moment because I'm the only black kid in the class or is everybody just ignoring it because they all think I'm white. So those kinds of thoughts used to come up a lot more especially in education for me because I think that people constantly judge me about my skin tone. (P6, line 259)

**Unique insights of Black/White biracial participants on societal beauty.** The participants discussed having unique experiences and perceptions regarding societal beauty because they were of two races. Within Western society they have found varying beauty standards for their Black and White monoracial counterparts and sometimes had difficulty meeting either group's standards. To cope with this, some of the women have learned to accept their physical appearance by remaining aware of the physical differences between monoracial and biracial individuals.

And I also feel like in terms of beauty, I think there's less acceptance, I would say with, like, black beauty than again, like, other races. Well, I guess for me like in the media and just in general what I imagined I think it kind of goes back to, like, hair a lot of times because all the other races still have this straight long hair so I

don't know how much that involves but I feel like there is some, like, again, in the media, I would sometimes see jokes about, black hair and just how different it is. And then also I think in general, like, in black beauty, there tends to be more of an acceptance for much curvier woman especially in the black community. And . . . but in the regular media, I feel like there are both again that weird love-hate thing where sometimes they kind of, like, idolized that. And then other times they, like, have some condescending ideas about it. So it's this . . . I don't know. It's just I feel like African beauty is the most like [othered] race there is in a way. Because it's just like the extreme opposite of us. And just with all the colonial history and slavery and everything, it's just like, I don't know if that would just like always be there. (P1, line 399)

I guess I will say one thing that has been helping me with this kind of stuff, is just becoming more socially aware and becoming more less socialized to what the beauty standards are because, especially for black women and biracial women and just woman of color, I feel like with those beauty standards are, it has really helped me come to peace with like, okay yes, Kendall Jenner is like the beauty standard right now. She's skinny, white, nice facial features but that's unrealistic. No one can attain that. She's also 77% of the population like that's what they're supposed to look like. So that doesn't apply to me and then, I just continuously am looking at social issues and just making sure that I am aware. Like yes, this is a beauty standard but it's okay that you don't follow that because you [do] in other ways, you are beautiful. (P3, line 300)

**Race and physical appearance in America.** The standard of beauty in America was discussed and many of the participants found that becoming socially aware of the various beauty standards is both frustrating and helpful. For example, it was suggested that the more preferred beauty standard in America is having a White skin tone, straight hair, and a small physique. However, it was also suggested that different beauty standards exist for monoracial Black women, such as having a bigger butt, thick thighs, and a small waist. These differences in beauty standards among their monoracial peers resulted in these participants questioning if it were possible for a Black and White biracial woman to fit such vastly different beauty standards.

Being aware that I am biracial, early on I would see these skinny white women going around, that's beauty standard in America. It's like being skinny white and blonde hair, brown hair, whatever. So I'd see them, its like, "Okay, I want to be like that" but then in the black community, like I said before, it's praise that you

have thicker thighs, a big butt, small waist and thicker chest and everything. So, it was this weird tossup between “Okay, I want to look, I wouldn’t mind being the skinny person with a thigh gap” unlike in the white community but then the black community, if you are a thicker person but you have a small waist, it’s like seen as the most beautiful thing ever. (P3, line 278)

I think that’s as I have gotten older. Like when I was super young, I don’t even think I, like, notice anything very much. Because it wasn’t until, like, middle school I feel like when I really started noticing differences in race in a big way. In like, elementary school, like I . . . even though everyone was so white and everything, for whatever reason, I just, like, didn’t think about it as much. I think that’s when I notice like the hair stuff. But I didn’t really put it together as, like, a bad thing yet. And then it was like when I went to middle school, when I think all of my, kind of, conceptualization, everything changed because that’s when it just became so much more apparent and that’s when, you know, like, looking beautiful became really important to all the girls.

And I remember, like, my best friend at the time said, like, “We can’t be friends anymore because I want to try and become popular.” And so, I, like, lost her as a friend and it was just this feeling of, like, “Well, why -- or why can’t you be associated with me? Or, like, why is that I am a detractor.” And so when I started looking around I just remember seeing, like, money was one big thing. Then I also felt like, you needed certain traits to, like, be accepted as, I don’t know, beautiful in our school and none of them, like, involved my hair or my skin color or all of these different things. And so that’s like the first time I think I started seeing it as only a negative thing. (P1, line 223)

***Does a biracial beauty standard exist?*** Many participants had come to a consensus that not all Black and White biracial women look alike or have similar physical features. However, they often found themselves questioning whether or not a beauty standard for Black and White biracial women did exist, because many of them encountered this preconceived idea that all Black and White biracial women have a similar physical appearance, such as a specific skin tone or hair texture. Despite this, these women desired to have a role model, whether in the media or in real life, whom they can turn to, because they felt that not enough biracial role models exist in terms of setting a beauty standard, making it difficult to feel completely positive about their physical appearance.

I think it would be really nice to see a lot more women like me in media. And then it would help women like me, who have bodies like me, I have never hated my body, I have never thought my body is disgusting, I have always loved my body but I think if I was somebody else and I wasn't taught to love myself I would probably hate my body and actually that's not true. (P6, line 334)

I think that—I don't know. Sometimes I think I fit it but sometimes I don't. I think that I have nice hair and I think it, I think the texture's a little bit dry but I think I do have the hair sometimes that fits that [biracial beauty] standard but in terms of skin tone, my skin's darker. So I don't think I fit that. Face, a little bit but I wish I had fuller lips to match that and then my body or my physique, I don't think it matches with that is at all. (P3, line 277)

Now I think if anything I've always been. I've [been a] little bit frustrated because I know that, well, because I told you that I wish that I had been a little bit darker like other family members so that's more I think apparent to other people that I am mixed because I've had some confusion from other people or really the only way they know that they know that I am mixed is by my hair. That's kind of been the only signifier for some people. (P2, line 80)

***Racially categorized by others.*** Racial categorization by others was a common experience among these participants. They often found themselves being asked by others to identify their race, or their race(s) was assumed. Some of these women understood the curiosity others had regarding their racial status and felt no ill will toward those who asked. Others, however, found this occurrence to be disheartening and reported that it resulted in some confusion regarding their racial self-identity. Pinpointing exactly why others assumed their race was unknown, but many felt that it may have to do with their varying physical features or ambiguous appearance. According to one participant, she was identified by others as at least partially Black because of the size of her butt, while for another woman it was because of her darker skin tone. Yet, for another participant, she was identified as at least partially White because of her hair texture and lighter skin tone. For those who were monoracially categorized, such as Black or Native American,

there was a desire to be more easily recognizable as multiracial, yet they were unsure as to how to make their racial status more apparent.

But I think in dominant American society, they would see me with my skin color and my hair and you know people always try to figure me out. They start making statements like “what are you? Are you Pacific Islander? Are you an Indian like not an Indian American but actually Indian?” Or just like random things and it’s like, “Okay, people want to find some sort of security.” (P3, line 314)

So it’s the texture of my hair that makes it that more apparent than not that I’m not just white. That I mixed with something else and sometimes they don’t even know with what. So there is lot of confusion on their part where as I wish that it was just more obvious because I would embrace that. So I think that has been frustrating over the years even when I was little that was kind of a shame. Or like not even know or they over hear it from somebody else or just randomly ask me which was fine but I just kind of wish that they just could just look at me now. Just because I had family where it was so obvious I don’t know. Yeah. Because I kind of wish. I mean nowadays you never really know. It’s kind of a melting pot which is understandable. (P2, line 87)

It’s still the same. It hurts me more not to know, like it doesn’t hurt me like my feelings are hurt. Well, actually, yeah. Sorry, but I still get it to this day. People still say that that, “I knew you’re black because of your butt, or I couldn’t like tell,” Or they call me Mexican or other races and it’s like I don’t expect you to know but don’t comment on me on it if you’re unsure, then don’t say the Mexican girl or the Asian girl if you’re unsure. Because I’m black and I’m white and I want to be addressed and thought of that way. (P4, line 166)

***Other v. self-identification.*** Participants discussed in great lengths the difficulties they experience between racial self-identification and being racially identified by others. This common occurrence often left participants feeling frustrated, because many of them felt as though they had zero autonomy in how they racially self-identified. While many of these participants self-identified as biracial, their racial identity was often challenged by others based on their physical appearance and/or being forced to choose one race.

Uh-hmm. Yeah. I think that is confusing too because, like, when . . . I don’t know. Like, it’s confusing because even though like in my group of friends or people I know and everything, you know, they’re used to me but there’s always times when you just feel that difference where it’s like either they’re pointing something out, like, about how they see it was different or, like, you’ll just notice that they

don't understand a certain experience you may be having as a bi-racial person. And so it's always the same awareness of, like, even though I'm in this community, I'm still like a little bit different than, like, I also feel the same with, like, the black community. And so it's -- yeah, I guess it's just that weird feeling of, like, Where do I belong? or, like, and then, like, Who am I supposed to be trying to get to accept me I guess. (P1, line 450)

I think there was definitely a push from myself in a way or also for my grandmother almost in a way to identify more with my African side just because I'd always been told by a lot of black people like no you are not and it would I think upset me to make me feel like how dare you take that from me? That's not your right and I don't appreciate it because I didn't choose it, I did not choose any of it so for you to take away my race it bothers me especially the blacks side because I feel a lot more closer and identify more to that side, than people can understand.

I think that part of it is because the push of knowing that people are going to tell me that I'm not black was there because I hadn't experienced it from the white side yet especially as a child, I hadn't seen it, nobody had said to me you are not white until I got into about Middle School Elementary-ish like 4th or 5th grade somebody had to tell me . . . people didn't tell me you are not white. And so for the black side people pointed it out so often or mis-chose the race that I think that I pushed myself to want it and to identify with and to say like you are not going to take this way from me, this is mine and I'm going to keep it whether you want me to or not I don't care. (P6, line 194)

And I absolutely hate being called, "The white girl." I absolutely hate it because I'm not white and I'm not black. I'm black and white. So, and I hate having to check boxes that say . . . like I applied for a permit for [like concealed weapons license] and it didn't say other [on there's] said either like African-American, Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian and that was it. And there was no other box and the lady told me that you can only check one and I thought that was just kind of crazy because how could you only check one, a lot of people are mixed? With not only black and white but all different races and how you could only check one, so . . . (P4, line 177)

### **Interpersonal Influences**

The literature discussed in Chapter II highlighted some of the challenges that multiracial persons experience, particularly the sense of inclusion. However, relationships and levels of communication were often put into question between these research participants and their families, peers, and strangers. Two constituents were identified that highlight these experiences. Participants discussed feeling as though multiracial

individuals' physical appearance was highlighted more often than the physical appearance of individuals of any other race and that specific terms were used to describe them. This hyper-focus from others on their physical appearance often left participants questioning the standards of beauty and whether or not they fit that standard. Many of the participants came to the realization that they did not meet the current standards of beauty via social media or being verbally informed by others. This often resulted in feeling alien-like or foreign and, most importantly, emotionally and physically disconnected from those around them. The following are two constituents and supporting quotes emphasizing the effects of their interpersonal relationships.

**Am I exotic?** Many of the participants experienced an increased focus from others on their physical features. This increased focus, according to the participants, typically takes the form of being referenced as “exotic.” While the majority of the participants encountered this phenomenon, many of them found this reference as bothersome and questioned what physical features made them appear to others as exotic. Participants also discussed feeling as though the term “exotic” is more often applied to non-White women than to women of any other race. Moreover, participants identified monoracial White individuals as the ones to apply this term to them the most.

And I do get told a lot, which I never think it; this is why I think it's funny though. You are very exotic, you so beautiful, I was like really? I thought I looked really average compared to most people but I think about what it is that people make the idea in their head that I'm exotic; is it my eyes? Because they are brown just like every black person you know, how they always say black people have brown eyes, I have brown eyes; that's not exotic. My skin tone is very much ambiguous race, I have white hair sometimes it's curly so you can't really tell if that's really my natural or not. So I wonder what people really see compared to what I see because when I look at myself I just see {her name}. I don't look at myself and say oh that's white, that's black, this is this. I just go no I am not black, here look like, that's what you have always looked like. (P6, line 65)



But I just feel like it's so easy for white culture to just like other us and then that makes our beauty sometimes . . . in my head like the easiest for them to either make exotic or fear or sexualized. (P1, line 415)

And I think just, like—it was kind of like a love-hate relationship because, you know, that concept of, like, “Oh, exotic beauty.” Which I feel like a lot of times people put just like anyone who's not white into that category and so, in a way, it was, like, nice or helpful because I could get attention from that because people are, like, “Oh, you're this, like, unique person.” And so that . . . they would find me attractive because of that but at the same time also, there are some annoying parts about that. Well, I guess kind of that, like, token, like, “Oh, you're cool because you're this, like, different person.” Even though, like, I grew up in America and I'm just . . . I felt just like everyone else, you know, so I guess I felt kind of like ingenuous in a way. And I don't know. Just there's something, like, almost like fetish kind of feel about it. (P1, line 199)

**Feeling marginal.** These participants experienced feeling racially marginalized and that their experiences were isolating and unique to individuals made up of more than one race. They discussed often being told that they were neither Black nor White enough to be considered a member of that monoracial group. Some of the participants attributed this perception to their lightened skin tone, making them feel out of place or as if they did not belong. Participants also discussed consistently being told that they were not Black and should therefore stop “talking and or acting black.” In addition, some experienced feeling disconnected from their families and peers, and questioning their level of belonging and where exactly they fit in because there was no one else in their families who looked like them or had features like them. For P5, she has always felt marginalized, which is very difficult for her and brought her to tears during our interview. She was unable to recall specific interactions that made her feel this way, but reported feeling physically different from both her maternal and paternal families.

We'd hang out my mom's side and they are all white, we'd hang out my dad's side and they are all black. And here I am this little mixed girl in the middle, just feeling completely out of place. And it was hard. It was really hard growing up, sorry I get emotional. And it's still that way today. It's like I just, I don't know. I

know that they love me and but I just don't feel like I fit in with either side. (P5, line 214)

Kind of, has been being able to fit into both groups because I was technically both and then actually hearing from my step mom growing up, who was white that certain things weren't black enough. You know like, you should do that, well, you shouldn't do that because of or you should do that because or I don't know, you will fit better into like this group or that group or whatever. May be it came down to more like the way I acted versus the way that I looked. You know you should act this way because then you would be perceived as being more black which I never necessarily agreed with. But I think a mixture of that tying in the fact that I was kind of lighter for being mixed kind of got under my skin a little bit. (P2, line 162)

Well, it's not that . . . like I had black friends, I have white friends; I have all kinds of friends. But I didn't really have a group, like I didn't hang with the more white people or with the more black people. But it always bothers me when people will say that like I'm ghetto or I'm talking black or something like that and I don't think that you could like speak a color. I'm talking what's natural to me based off of my culture and how I was raised. It's not like I'm trying to speak black or speak white or whatever that means but that bothers me when people say stuff like that and still to this day. Like I said I had that boss who pulled into the office and said, "Stop talking black, you're not black." (P4, line 152)

### **Intrapersonal Influences**

On many occasions, participants dealt with intrapersonal challenges regarding their physical appearance. Many of them recognized that they did not fit the ideal standards of beauty set in Western society. This left many of them struggling internally to accept or appreciate their features, and often they desired to change them. This finding is congruent with the discussion proposed by Hall (2004), who suggested that multiracial women may alter their appearance to become socially accepted by others, such as straightening their naturally curly hair. Hair texture was the most prominent feature discussed in this study, and while many of them appreciated the versatility their hair texture offered, many found it difficult to manage. Others, however, found pleasure in the idea that their hair texture could be described as "in-between" and was not as unruly as

seen with some of their monoracial counterparts. The following four constituents and supporting quotes highlight these findings.

**Ambiguous hair texture.** Some of the participants in this study described their hair texture as racially ambiguous. For many of them, they felt as though their hair texture was in-between what is typically seen among monoracial White and monoracial Black women. For example, some of the women described their hair texture as neither coarse or naturally long and straight, yet many of them enjoyed having the option to manipulate their hair from curly to straight. Together, these perceptions resulted in some of these women feeling as though they appeared racially ambiguous to themselves and others.

Well, I think, you know I have my own hair type and whenever I wear it curly white people always want to touch it and like you know whatever and I don't have black hair necessarily. I don't have white hair. I just have my own hair. Because it's mine. I don't know. I mean I'm a hairstylist or used to be a hairstylist and have done multiple types of hair and mixed hair is different from most people's hair and I like my hair because I can do curly, I can do straight, I can kind of go in between and for some people it's a little harder to do, you know may be if you have really straight hair, it's really hard to do curly hair, if you have really kinky hair and it started to get straight. So I am now, as I'm getting older and I'm learning how to do my own hair and wear it curly, I actually like it and it's nice to have the versatility of going straight, curly and everything in between pretty much. (P5, line 103)

Well, it's kind of been like an evolving image I guess; now when I look in the mirror, I see kind of, my own self-constructed image in a way. Because like, I naturally have curly hair but I usually straighten it and so, I guess I see someone who looks a lot more like, unknown or who can fit in, like, many different categories. And I think I feel like, safe in that image. (P1, line 10)

**Dealing with my hair.** Difficulty effectively managing and/or styling their hair in a naturally curly state was described by many of these participants. Many of them discussed a rather lifelong struggle with styling their curly hair to their liking, which often resulted in them choosing to straighten their hair so that the curls no longer existed.

Some of these women also described their mothers or caretakers having significant difficulty managing their hair, which, as children, appeared to highlight the racial difference between them and their White parent. This experience often led these women to perceive curly hair as a bad or negative trait and to feel as though this was reinforced in the media and or mainstream society. Because of their negative perception on curly hair, many of them described feeling ashamed of their natural non-straight hair. While this was described as their reality, many of these women desired a role model of how to style their natural hair, which they felt could have helped improve their self-esteem.

I wished my hair was straight and long and seeing my mom too because she's blonde straight hair. I was just like why can't . . . Everything she did, every time she woke up and did her hair, it was like within five minutes, it would be done and for me, it was like she has to sit here and comb my hair out and like she didn't know what was she was doing most of the time I thought she knew what she was doing but looking back she had a lot of other people do my hair and then also living in a town where it's like we lived La Grand Oregon. So it's like Eastern Oregon with no other black people basically. No one knew how to do my hair. (P3, line 35)

And, like I also just remember being very aware of how different my, like, hairstyles had to be or just the process of getting ready. Like, because, like, you know, as like a young girl, especially like it would take my parents forever to, like, brush through my hair and it was, like, painful. And it's like whole ordeal. Which I also hated because it's just like I just wish I could come through it, like, you know, like, easily some people do. And they put my hair in, like, braids and just, like different hairstyles. Or sometimes I would just like let it go natural but I was always just very aware, like, again, that, like, it seemed different from the people around me. And I don't like that. And when I got older, when I started, like of, taking care of it myself, there was like a time where I just kind of, like, didn't know what I was doing and I think a huge part of it might have been because, like, my mom was white and my dad is black but he didn't really ever helped me with, like, any kind of, like, beauty care, like, what to do with your hair. And my mom had no idea. (P1, line 157)

I feel like, when I wear my hair curly I get tons of compliments about wearing my hair curly, and I should wear curly more often but for me I just like it straight and I don't really know why necessarily. I mean just from growing up, like I said like with everyone else having their straight hair and the media all you see, you don't really see people with curly hair might be curled hair but not naturally curly hair

and so I think just with the media not necessarily saying that it's not pretty but it's never in the media. So it's just not as pretty. I guess is the feeling that I get from it really. (P5, line 40)

**Love/hate relationship with physical features.** Participants discussed experiencing insecurities about various physical features, while also being content with their physical appearance. Many of them discussed not necessarily dwelling on their physical appearance, but that when body image was brought to their attention they would identify various physical features that they would not mind changing or altering. Some of the women also discussed sometimes feeling physically attractive and were able to point out what features they liked, but also described initially feeling indifferent about these very same features.

I like what I see, I definitely have to say for my body I do put it down a lot more in a sense that when I'm even with people and they say oh I wish I had your butt, oh I wish I had your boobs, you have such a big butt, you have this, that and I go I wish I didn't, I wish I looked like whatever; skinny, I wish I was a twig because I get attention for it and I don't like that. That's something that I do have a hard time with, even trusting men because I go "Oh he just wants to have sex with me because of my body type" and I don't want that. (P6, line 55)

And, yeah, I just see someone, like, you know, depends on the day but sometimes I see someone who's, like, slightly attractive or then I'm okay with, and then other days I just, you know, see someone who I'm annoyed with or don't feel good about. So it just kind of depends on my mood in the day in lots of different practice I would say. (P1, line 15)

Initially I'm like ewww, and then I'm like I like this angle this looks nice, this angle I look nice, this angle I look nice and like I try to take a selfie that looks really nice and I just try to find the silver lining on my face shape sometimes and oh, you're really pretty if you cover those part of your face and just look different ways but then it all comes back to the fact that okay you generally have a pretty face. Just leave it alone. I put it away after that. (P3, line 179)

**Physical features I want to change.** Changing or altering certain physical features was identified. Many of them felt as though their skin tone was either too light or too dark in comparison to their biracial peers. Having a smaller body size was also

desired, particularly the buttocks or bottom half of their bodies. Having hair texture that was less frizzy was also a request. Wanting to change these features often stemmed from the notion that White women with smaller body types or certain physical features are more attractive.

One thing, less with black men, more with black women that I find they want to put me down or they want to make me feel bad and I didn't choose to be light skinned; I would tell people all the time, I would love to have dark beautiful skin, to me I wouldn't care. I was made the way that I was made but I don't think that its fair that just because you have dark skin and I have light skin that you need to call me a light bright or you need to tell me that I'm not black and so yes there was a push because of that for sure. (P6, line 210)

Yes, I definitely hate my hair. So I'm always looking at my hair and trying to . . . I wish it was a little different. It's frizzy and hard to manage and also I'm not really happy with my body. I'm always kind of looking at that and judging myself. Like my shape, my size. I'm not really happy with my size right now. (P4, line 16)

I hate my lips. That's something when I was little too. My lips have always been smaller and then my nose too. My lips compared to a lot of people, they're pretty small especially in the black community and just in general. My nose, it I just never liked because it's just round and it's like this in between kind of thing going on. It's not your stereotypical African-American. It's not your white nose. I've always been insecure about my lips. I've had friends who are also biracial were telling me why you're lips are so small. They're thin. They look like pieces of paper and just saying little things like that. It's always been that kind of thing but in terms of bone structures, I like bone structures. (P3, line 137)

### **The Structure of Experience for Participants**

Upon reexamination of the transformed meaning units and the use of imaginative variation, the following constituents were determined to be “truly essential for the phenomenon to present itself to a consciousness” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 200): Feeling Marginal, Does a Biracial Beauty Standard Exist?, Racially Categorized by Others, and Other v. Self-Identification. These four constituents were determined to be truly essential because they were common experiences among all of the participants and capture what it meant for six Black and White multiracial women living in the Pacific Northwest to

experience and perceive their physical appearance in relation to their racial self-identity. The subsequent paragraph is the general structure of their experience.

For all participants in this study, being Black and White is sometimes challenging because their racial identity is often questioned or assumed by others based on their physical appearance. For some it is their ambiguous hair texture and/or skin tone, while for others it is their body size and facial features. This continual questioning not only made them feel disconnected and marginalized from their Black and White monoracial peers, but also robbed them of the autonomy in self-identifying their race and interjected thoughts about altering certain physical features. All six participants recognized that not all Black and White multiracial women look alike, but often experienced feeling as though they did not fit the prototype of what Black and White multiracial women look like as defined by society. This experience led to them questioning and comparing their physical appearance to other Black and White multiracial women and wondering if a beauty standard for their population existed and if so, what the specifics for that beauty standard were. But at this time, participants were unaware of a figure representative of Black and White multiracial women, leaving them in a continued isolated state of being.

## **Chapter VII: Limitations, Implications, and Conclusions**

### **Limitations of This Study**

The main objective of qualitative research is to provide its audience with a detailed description of the participant's experience(s) regarding the phenomenon under investigation. This research method has many strengths, particularly when information is needed and quantitative research will not suffice. However, there are limitations within qualitative research that must be discussed.

One limitation to qualitative research is the limited number of participants. As mentioned in Chapter V, participant sampling is purposeful so that a true and detailed understanding of the experience can be obtained, and having a small number of participants makes this endeavor much more feasible (Giorgi, 2009). The pitfall, however, is that because of the small sample size, the results cannot be generalized to the Black and White multiracial population at large nor are they transferable to the Black and White multiracial population of other regions of the United States. Moreover, the findings of qualitative research are not tested for statistical significance and instead can be interpreted as occurring by chance (Atieno, 2009). Only six participants were interviewed in this study, and while data saturation was obtained, it would have been intriguing to identify the results had 12 or more participants been interviewed. Interviewing a larger population sample may have yielded additional experiences and or further reinforced these findings.

The multiracial population in the United States is vast and includes an infinite number of race combinations. As aforementioned, research among the multiracial population and physical appearance is both limited and not well developed. This research



study examined only those who self-identified as Black and White. However, researching how other non-Black and White multiracial individuals experience their physical appearance is worth investigating. Having an understanding of how other multiracial individuals experience their physical appearance is important because they may also have unique challenges similar to the ones identified in this study. Another limitation is that this study only examined multiracial women and did not include men. There were also no incentives given to the six participants, which may have impacted what and how much they shared with this researcher. However, almost all six participants mentioned feeling grateful for the opportunity to openly share their experiences, which they felt are unique to Black and White mixed race women. Additionally, many of them were excited that this study would become a public document because they felt it would enhance the public's understanding of what it means to be multiracial.

Another limitation is that both qualitative data collection and qualitative data analysis are often more time-consuming than data collection and analysis in quantitative research. Data collection for this study began in June 2015 and concluded in August 2015. Data analysis began in September 2015 and concluded in January 2016. There are many reasons for this lengthy process; they include: specific subject recruitment, length of interviews, the need to find a confidential space for the interviews to take place in a natural setting, the need for verbatim written transcriptions of the interviews, methodical steps of data analysis as set by Giorgi (2009), and member checking.

Finally, the results presented in qualitative research may be influenced by the researcher's personal biases, hence the importance of bracketing (Giorgi, 2009). When collecting and analyzing the data, it is imperative that the researcher suspend all

knowledge and past experiences relative to what is being studied. This is no easy feat and required this researcher to remain mindful of the information and experiences presented by each participant and to analyze these data accordingly, seeking confirmation from the participants that the findings and psychological interpretations accurately captured their implicit experiences. Ensuring this process decreased researcher bias and misinterpretation of how the six women in this study perceived and experienced their physical appearance.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The purpose of empirical research, whether qualitative or quantitative, is to fill a knowledge gap and expand any existing research. The knowledge gap for this study was the subjective experiences and perceptions of body image among multiracial Black and White women. As discussed in Chapters I and II, the multiracial population in the United States is growing and is expected to increase exponentially.

The findings of this research study provide a stepping-stone to future research endeavors among this population. The results of this study indicated that participants spent a lot of time discussing their physical features that resulted in racial ambiguity and its impact on the relationship between their physical appearance and Western standards of beauty. Therefore, it would be of importance for future researchers to further examine the question: Do these women (Black/White multiracial) attempt to seek affirmation of beauty to counterbalance racial ambiguity?

This study only recruited subjects living within the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. This region is most often considered liberal, with fewer racial tensions between Blacks and Whites in comparison to other areas of the country. All of the

participants in this study self-identified as biracial, despite feeling marginal and or receiving pushback from both their Black and White monoracial peers that had a lot to do with skin tone and hair texture. Given their strong stance to self-identify as biracial regardless of people's input, it would be worth further investigation to examine if this same phenomenon occurs in the other regions of the United States as well. Therefore, conducting a quantitative study in determining a number of Black and White multiracial women dealing with similar challenges as described by these six participants would be a meaningful addition to the field of psychology. A qualitative study similar to this study across the United States though methodologically challenging, could be a great benefit as well.

Replicating this study, but with a much larger sample size, would enhance the knowledge base for both psychology and women's studies by offering a more generalized understanding of this population. Examining how both adolescents and older multiracial Black and White adults also experience their physical appearance is important and should be studied, as their life experiences are likely different than those of the young adults included in this study. Additionally, conducting a qualitative longitudinal study with Black and White multiracial women about their physical appearance at intervals, such as at one, five, and ten years, would be beneficial as it might reveal specific themes about this subject not attainable from a one-time interview.

Finally, for this study the monoracial race of the participants' parents was not a factor. However, some of the participants discussed examining their mothers in determining what physical characteristics were necessary to be considered beautiful. With these findings in mind, a qualitative study exploring the differences between body

esteem and its relationship to being raised by a monoracial White or Black mother is worth further investigation. Some participants spoke about their fathers and race and physical appearance. Therefore, it would be valuable to examine what role, if any, the father plays in biracial/multiracial status and physical appearance. Investigating the role sexual orientation or identification plays in physical appearance would also be an important factor as well, given the increasing number of stereotypes or generalizations made about various populations. For example, there is literature suggesting that lesbian women do not feel the same pressures that heterosexual women feel in achieving the perfect body type (Atkins, 1998).

### **Clinical Implications**

While the results of this study are not generalizable to all Black and White multiracial women, these findings implied that there is an increased likelihood for this population to experience decreased body esteem. Edwards and Pedrotti (2004) stressed the importance of discussing the socially constructed challenges within the multiracial community; one big issue described by participants is having few to no role models in popular media to assist them in achieving and sustaining a healthy body image. Therefore, it is imperative that mental health clinicians provide their multiracial clients the opportunity to discuss this deeply personal, yet sociopolitical issue, if necessary. It is equally important that mental health clinicians remain mindful that not all multiracial individuals will self-identify as such (Rockquemore, 1999), and that according to Root (1990b), it is not problematic so long as the individual does not deny other parts of their racial ancestry.

Results of this study suggest that racial identity development is an influential factor in shaping one's body image and deciding what physical characteristics equate beauty. Participants in this study were unable to identify a prototype of a Black and White multiracial woman, which they explained as problematic in their development of a balanced self-image. Therefore, clinicians assessing for body image concerns should not utilize current body size assessment scales, as they do not apply to this population. Nor should the goal be to create a standardized body size assessment for multiracial women. Instead, clinicians should assist their clients in discussing and normalizing the differences in physical characteristics. This research is not only beneficial to mental health clinicians working with individuals, but also when working with couples and families, particularly interracial couples and blended families with both monoracial and multiracial children.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are suggested for Black and White multiracial women dealing with body image concerns. It is recommended that Black and White multiracial women find support groups run by mental health professionals with expertise in multiracial identity, where they can share and process their experiences. Participating in such a group is important because many of the participants in this study felt alone in their experiences and felt that they did not have adequate role models to help them achieve a balanced self-image. Additionally, I recommend developing and utilizing healthy coping strategies, such as, replacing negative body shaming statements about oneself with positive ones, not comparing ones physical appearance to others, and being critical of media messages and images that promote unobtainable beauty ideals. If unable to effectively manage such concerns

independently, seeking professional individual counseling is strongly encouraged. One experience particularly bothersome to the participants in this study was having others assume their racial identity based on their physical features and/or suggesting that they should identify as one race.

For all multiracial individuals I strongly recommended familiarizing and employing the Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage, developed by Root (1993):

I HAVE THE RIGHT. . .

Not to justify my existence in this world.  
 Not to keep the races separate within me.  
 Not to justify my ethnic legitimacy  
 Not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical or ethnic ambiguity.

I HAVE THE RIGHT. . .

To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify.  
 To identify myself differently than how my parents identify me.  
 To identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters.  
 To identify myself differently in different situations.

I HAVE THE RIGHT. . .

To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial or multiethnic.  
 To change my identity over my lifetime--and more than once.  
 To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.  
 To freely choose whom I befriend and love.

I also suggest that multiracial individuals seek out and partake in groups or organizations that promote multicultural awareness, as well as expand their knowledge and understanding of the existing literature on multiracial experience could be helpful in increasing self-esteem. Finally, challenging the preconceptions and misconceptions about the phenotype of a multiracial person, is important and necessary, because it will likely empower the individual in resolving their self-identification.

## Conclusions

The multiracial population in the United States is rapidly growing, and much remains to be discovered about this population. The racial makeup of multiracial individuals in the United States varies greatly, but according to the 2010 United States Census, the majority of respondents reported being mixed with two races, with almost two million of them self-identifying as Black and White. Attempting to conceptualize and understand the multiracial population has been an ongoing endeavor for many years, as American psychologists and researchers recognize the importance in assisting this population develop and maintain a balanced perception of self-image. Terms such as *exotic*, *beautiful*, and *fascinating* are sometimes used to describe multiracial women and is not necessarily always positive, yet the impact this experience has on these women is not well developed. Additionally, the exploration of body image among this population has also received very little attention in the research literature. Therefore, the aim of this research study was to examine body image in Black and White multiracial women in an attempt to begin filling this knowledge gap.

The participants in this research study included six self-identified Black and White multiracial women between the ages of 18 and 30 living in the Pacific Northwest region. This researcher implemented Giorgi's (2009) qualitative research method known as descriptive phenomenology. This researcher followed Giorgi's (2009) method of data analysis upon collecting semi-structured interview data with six participants. The analysis provided a rich description of six Black and White multiracial women's experiences and perceptions of their physical appearance.

The findings of this study yielded 12 constituents, which were categorized into three overarching themes:

Sociopolitical: Unearned Power and Privilege, Unique Insights of Black/White Biracial Participants on Societal Beauty, Race and Physical Appearance in America, Does a Biracial Beauty Standard Exist?, Racially Categorized by Others, Other v. Self-Identification

Interpersonal: Am I Exotic?, Feeling Marginal

Intrapersonal: Ambiguous Hair Texture, Dealing With My Hair, Love/Hate Relationship with Physical Features, Physical Features I Want to Change

Participant discussions regarding these categories were supported by previous research, and some of the findings were new information not identified in existing literature but informative and worth further exploration. Future research that is particularly relevant in further developing the findings of this research study includes the examination of the differences between body esteem and its relationship to being raised by a monoracial White or Black mother. Other pertinent findings of this research study were the participants' experience of being racially categorized by others, being physically described by others as *exotic*, and feeling as though they did not fit the standard of beauty for biracial individuals, despite not knowing what that standard entailed.

This research study was conducted with four goals in mind. One was to provide insight on the lifeworld of Black and White multiracial women and how they experience and perceive their physical appearance. Two, this researcher wanted to capture the experience of a community often overlooked in the research literature, despite the long social history and growing population rate. Three, this researcher sought to assist mental



health professionals to engage in a discussion of the socially constructed challenges associated with biracial Black and White women as described by the six participants in this study. Four, this researcher aspired to increase mental health professionals' cultural competence when working with clients who are biracial Black and White women.

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Appendix A  
Participant Recruitment Flyer



School of Applied Psychology,  
Counseling and Family Therapy

## Seeking Participants

I am a doctoral student at Antioch University, Seattle exploring how Black and White multiracial adult women experience and perceive their physical appearance (i.e. skin color, hair texture and physique).

I am looking for women:

- Who identify as Black and White bi/multiracial
- Who are between the ages of 18 and 30 years old
- Who reside in the Pacific Northwest

Interviews will be face to face, audio-recorded and will take approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.

If you are interested please contact  
Vanessa Geissler  
Email: [varmstrong@antioch.edu](mailto:varmstrong@antioch.edu)

Appendix B  
Participant Interview Prompts



School of Applied Psychology,  
Counseling and Family Therapy

Participants in this study will be asked to answer the following prompts:

1. **Introduction to this study** - I am studying body image in Black and White multiracial women and I am interested in your perceptions and experiences as a biracial woman regarding your physical characteristics, such as, hair texture, skin color, facial features and physique.
2. Describe how you perceive your physical appearance, what do you see when you look in the mirror?
3. Describe your thoughts and feelings about your hair texture, skin color, facial features and physique
4. How does being a Black and White multiracial woman play a role in your thoughts and feelings about your hair texture, skin color, facial features and physique?

Appendix C

Participant Information and Consent Form

Dear interviewee,

Thank you for your participation in this interview. I (*Vanessa Geissler, MA*) will be asking you questions about body image. Our interview will take about 1.5 to 2 hours and will be audio-recorded. Once all of the data for this study has been collected, transcribed and reviewed, you will then be asked to examine the transcription of your interview for accuracy, and if necessary, you may add additions and or corrections.

One's physical appearance can be difficult to discuss, therefore you may experience some discomfort. Such discomforts may include increased physical self-consciousness, the revealing of disordered eating patterns and or disordered behavioral patterns. When appropriate, I will recommend treatment and provide you with a local (*in or near Seattle, WA*) listing of treatment facilities. You may end the interview and any further participation in this research at any time, without penalty.

Information you share with me will be kept strictly confidential and you will remain anonymous throughout this study. Furthermore, what you discuss with me will not be disclosed without your written consent, unless there is suspicion of abuse or neglect of a child or adult dependent persons, per RCW 26.44.30. Or should you become an imminent danger to self or others, per RCW 71.05.120.

Your research records will be kept at *Antioch University, Seattle* in a secured file cabinet. If information is transported, it will be contained in a locked briefcase and/or encrypted and password protected on a USB Drive.

For further questions regarding this research and research participants' rights please contact:

Vanessa Geissler (Primary researcher) at [varmstrong@antioch.edu](mailto:varmstrong@antioch.edu)

Liang Tien (Research Committee Chair) at [ltein@antioch.edu](mailto:ltein@antioch.edu)

**As an informed participant of this research study, I understand that: (please initial)**

1. \_\_\_\_ My participation is voluntary and I can stop at any time, without penalty.
2. \_\_\_\_ I am aware of what my participation involves.
3. \_\_\_\_ I am aware of the potential risks involved.
4. \_\_\_\_ Should I need treatment I will be provided with a list of treatment facilities.
5. \_\_\_\_ I am aware of the limits of confidentiality.
6. \_\_\_\_ I am aware that there will be no form of payment for my participation.

7. \_\_\_\_\_ I know whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ All my questions about the study have been satisfactorily answered.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ I release the institution (*Antioch University, Seattle*) and its agents from liability or negligence.

**I have read, initialled and understood the above, and give consent to participate:**

**Participant name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I have explained the above and answered all questions asked by the participant:**

**Researcher's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_